

“Beyond the Colour Line”:
Representation and Transposition in Bernardine Evaristo’s
Blonde Roots

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“We” are in *this* together

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1. YINKA SHONIBARE, *NELSON'S SHIP IN A BOTTLE* (2010)

1. Introduction: Representation beyond the “colour line”

Is it possible to imagine Blacks enslaving Whites? What happens when an author turns racial categories upon their heads? *Blonde Roots*, the fourth novel by British-Nigerian author Bernardine Evaristo published in 2008, answers these questions: a reversed world in which Africans enslave Europeans. Neither compromising the cruel historical realities of slavery nor her own poetic voice, Evaristo presents “Ambossans” or “blaks” as the ruling race of a global economy based upon the transatlantic slave trade settled between the reimagined geography of the “United Kingdom of Great Ambossa”, “England” and the “West Japanese Islands of Amarika” (Annex 7.2). We discover through the voice of Doris —the enslaved English protagonist— that this time “Europanes” or “whytes” have to endure the atrocities of slavery which constitute the economic and political cornerstones of the colonial activities of the metropolis, here reimagined as “Great Ambossa”.

However, despite the protagonist’s enslavement, Doris is not represented as a victim; she strives for freedom and voices bold opposition to the Ambossans’ racist regime of representation. Her feistiness and irony invokes a disturbing world that not only inverts the classical regime of representation of black and white but also questions those stereotypes that are still operating in our society. But does Evaristo actually write beyond what Du Bois defined as the “problem of the color-line” (1994: v)? As a matter of fact, Paul Gilroy contends that despite the apparent change and withdrawal of former patterns of conflict and ideas of race, racial divisions are still haunting our society (2004: 1). In the twenty-first century, the establishment of political communities in racialized form are due to the “consolidation of *culture lines* rather than color lines” (2004: 1) and if we want to reorient the discussion on racial difference towards the

future, we have to place a “higher value upon the cosmopolitan histories and transcultural experiences” (2004: 7). This dissertation seeks to engage with this perspective focusing on Evaristo’s challenging representation of racial and gender stereotypes and, what I consider, her transposition of race, diasporic sites and alterity.

The concept of transposition, a term I have borrowed to inform my reading of the novel, well known in literary theory, has been recently used by feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti to explain her theory of “nomadic ethics” (2008). Central to Braidotti’s transposition is the search for and the creation of interconnections between different communities implying “a variety of possible political strategies and the non-dogmatic acceptance of potentially contradictory positions” (2008: 7). At the same time, the term reflects the search for new modes of representation adequate to the complexities of the contemporary world. As I will explain in the following pages, Evaristo’s provoking reversal and her audacious synchronization of particular space and time dynamics — described as “chronotopias” (McLeod 2011:172)— additionally reveal a feminist dimension which concurs with Braidotti’s understanding of transposition.

Looking at her previous novels in verse, Evaristo can be considered representative of those new transcultural experiences that try to challenge and trespass conventions. She has often stated her clear commitment to new expressions of anti-essentialism, difference and hybridity: “My project as a writer is to always push the boundaries, to venture into new, sometimes precarious territory. It’s risky but I can’t help myself” (Collins 2008: 1201-1202). This is most evident in her previous verse novels *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), as well as in her “novel-with-verse” *Soul Tourists* (2005) in which Evaristo re-negotiates the sense of belonging of

black subjects in contemporary British society as well as their traditional representation in history.

In contrast, *Blonde Roots* occupies a distinct place within Evaristo's writing trajectory as her first novel in prose. As its title and cover image suggest (Annex 7.2.), the novel's theme is clearly related to traditional slave narratives. Recalling the American slave novel *Roots* (1976) by Alex Haley and its homonymous televised mini-series (1977), Evaristo disturbingly entitles her novel *Blonde Roots* and explicitly presents her enslaved protagonist as a white blonde woman. The novel revolves primarily around the interweaving lives of Doris Scagglethorpe and her black master Chief Kaga Konata Katamba I, Bwana for short, and is organized into three books.

"Book One" starts, in the style of a proper slave narrative, with Doris's attempt to escape from her fate as Bwana's domestic slave in his household in tropical Londolo. Fleeing through the city's forgotten underground system with the help of the Resistance, a movement in charge of releasing slaves, she begins a journey which is both physical and mental. During her flight, Doris recalls her happy childhood with her three sisters in England, despite her status as a serf in an England Evaristo reimagines as Medieval. The reader also learns about her traumatic capture at the age of ten and the horrific conditions of the Middle Passage on a slave ship where many other European slaves died after unspeakable sufferings. Once in New Londolo, the main settlement in the West Japanese Islands, Doris is sold to her first masters and is ironically renamed "Omorenomwara", meaning "This child will not suffer" (Evaristo 2009: 37).¹ Intended as playmate for her master's spoiled daughter, whom she nicknames "Little Miracle", Doris has to cope with the irreversibility of her new fate. But showing the first signs of

¹ From now on references to *Blonde Roots* will appear as *BR*.

her future resilience, she will defeat her merciless first enslaver and return to Londolo to become Bwana's personal secretary.

Once she seems to be on her way to Europa, Doris's narration is suddenly interrupted at the end of "Book One". Subverting the reader's expectations of a triumphant slave narrative, "Book Two" introduces Doris's enslaver Bwana as narrator. Bwana addresses a "*Dear Reader*" (BR: 112) through his autobiographical pamphlet "The Flame". In this sardonic pro-slavery treatise, he not only proclaims his pseudo-scientific justifications of racial discrimination but also describes his miraculous career, moving from his "inauspicious origins" (BR: 109) to his position as a successful slave trader and capitalist businessman. His account reinforces Evaristo's analysis of the arbitrariness of the exertion of power and mockingly debunks ideas on racial purity, as we shall see later.

But despite Doris's stamina and apparent success, she has no chance to escape the rage and vengeance of her master. In "Book Three" Doris recalls in the first person the brutal punishment she receives after her seizure and a new trip to the West Japanese Islands. In Bwana's plantation "Home Sweet Home", she becomes a sugar cane cutter, the most savage form of enslavement. But in spite of all her sufferings, Doris and the other slaves she meets are never victimised. While they are doomed to accept their fate as slaves, they show their own means of resistance. Difference becomes the means by which active cultural syncretism and diverse forms of solidarity are enacted transforming the slaves' daily survival in subtle contestation. In the plantation, she finds companionship and solidarity through her best friend Ye Memé, finds her sister Sharon—who has now become Bwana's sexual slave—and experiences love, thus managing to adjust to the harsh life in the plantation. Likewise, Doris never ceases her pursuit of

freedom. In order to save the lives of her sister's and her best friend's sons, she attempts a last and definitive flight. Thanks to the conjunction of the disparate members of the plantation, they manage to escape to the Maroon's camp, the name given to the area where runaway slaves hide, in what Evaristo calls the "Freedom Country" (*BR*: 258). But *Blonde Roots* does not end here or as happily as the reader would expect. Evaristo closes the novel with a "Postscript" (*BR*: 259-261) in which she outlines the various fates of the protagonists. As we shall see in the close reading of the postscript, Evaristo links the fates of her characters to the lives of contemporary British peoples.

Evaristo's counterfactual history and her challenging reminiscences to former slave narratives have taken scholars to approach *Blonde Roots* either from a metafictional perspective (Burkitt 2011) or from the discourses of belonging and self-formation (Velickovik 2011). It has also been suggested that Evaristo's racial inversion, evident in her multifaceted and dense text, reveals the intersections of race, gender and class issues (Cuder-Domínguez 2011: 73) that determine contemporary Black British identities. Rather than stressing the sometimes forgotten roots of Britain's implications in the transatlantic slave trade and Evaristo's implicit deconstruction of conventional representations of history (Burkitt 2011; Cuder-Domínguez 2011; Muñoz 2011), I have decided instead to draw attention to the novel's subversion of traditional signifying practices. Evaristo's parallel universe shows that the questions of *how* and *for whom* certain representations work lay at the heart of *Blonde Roots*. My dissertation is therefore written from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, which I use extensively to explain issues of representation. At the same time, I have used Braidotti's philosophical theory of transposition to explain *Blonde Roots*' gender specific renegotiation of traditional discourses of representation and difference through the use of chronotopes.

John McLeod has recently argued that from her first works Evaristo forges “a vision of polycultural interrelation which breaks beyond dichotomous distinctions between black history and white oppression” (2011: 171). She mainly does this through what he calls —following Bakhtin’s concept of the “chronotope”— “chronotopias” and a “transpositional sensibility” (2011: 172). “Chronotopias” fuse dynamics of space and time transposing them into transcultural images; Evaristo merges diachronic histories within synchronic spaces which open up “unrealised polycultural possibilities of dwelling companionably side by side” (2011: 172). McLeod contends that Evaristo’s transpositional sensibility has to be understood as breaking beyond the traditional understandings of hybridity and conventional parameters of black British writing (2011: 172).

This challenging interpretation of chronotope is exemplarily reflected and visualised by another British-Nigerian conceptual artist: Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962). It could be argued that many of his works display a similar transpositional sensibility. He juxtaposes and synchronizes typical African and English signifiers (particularly those identified as quintessential of either culture) transposing them into new polycultural sites. An instance of this is the image which I have chosen to open this section. In his sculpture *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle* (2010), Shonibare interconnects diachronic histories, as the reproduction of Nelson’s ship HMS Victory indicates, with spaces that are to be considered synchronic, as London’s Trafalgar Square on which the sculpture was exhibited in 2010. Moreover, the replica’s sails are made of African Batik Fabric, a recurrent element in Shonibare’s works. The use of these typically African fabrics allows him to remind the audience of African presence in Britain’s imperial past simultaneously displacing canonical readings of British history. But the multicoloured

cloths of the sails in *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* have a far more complex history. They originate from Indonesian methods of wax-printing brought to Africa by Dutch merchants who colonized Indonesia (Lacayo 2009). Interestingly, Shonibare buys the fabric at Brixton market, one of London's most hybrid areas and a symbol of cultural exchange par excellence (Mirza 2010). Its use in the HMS Victory constitutes, therefore, a satirical deconstruction not only of the idea of pure Englishness but also of cultural essentialism in general. By remoulding stereotypes, both artists mockingly reflect on received social opinions. I have chosen several of Shonibare's works to complement my analysis of *Blonde Roots*.

If racial representations constitute one fundamental axis of *Blonde Roots*, the other axis of my analysis is the representation of gender through the female protagonist's trials and tribulations. A gender specific dimension is not analysed in McLeod's interpretation of Evaristo's transpositional sensibility. But *Blonde Roots* engages with contemporary gender debates and concerns, mostly those that involve a critique of stereotypes, gender roles and, ultimately, of patriarchal power relations. Thus, on the one hand, my reading of *Blonde Roots*, concurs with postcolonial theories, conveying anti-essentialist attitudes and drawing attention to axes of differentiation that transcend a racially constructed view of alterity. On the other hand, and as my reading of the novel shall show, Doris's story is also a journey which, in Braidotti's sense, aims to deconstruct newly strengthened master narratives (2011: 170-75), standing for a theoretical nomadism that challenges current politics of representation. Following Braidotti's argumentation, it is thus possible to argue that Evaristo's transpositions form part of those new figurations that propose creative links and interconnections between discursive communities which are too often kept apart from each other (2008: 7).

Indeed, Doris seems to embody the complicated life lines of a diasporic nomad, as she has to cope with persistent racialized power differences in different space variables.

Notwithstanding these sometimes contradictory shifts that characterise our contemporary society, transposition is not to be understood as a quantitative mode of plural multiplications but, in Braidotti's line, rather as a kind of playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme of its own (2008: 5). It is in this context that Evaristo's transpositions can be defined as gender specific and that, perhaps, provides an answer to our initial question whether *Blonde Roots*' goes beyond the colour line. In the following chapters, my aim is thus to disclose Evaristo's gender specific transpositions and her intricate polycultural interconnected images and the way they contribute to blur conventional racial and cultural assumptions.

My analysis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter draws into sharp focus those postcolonial and feminist theories that deal with the representation of alterity. It departs from the idea that the novel addresses the double meaning of the concept of representation by challenging, on the one hand, the concept of realist practices of depiction, and on the other, by contesting traditional practices of delegation expected of black artists, the so called "burden of representation" (Mercer 1990). From this derives a series of consequences that are especially meaningful for my reading of *Blonde Roots*. The first chapter is subdivided into two sections. The first section starts with the postcolonial theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, pioneer authors in relation to issues of representation. Key notions such as colonial discourse, ambivalence, hybridity and subalternaty become central to their understanding of cultural representation. I take also into account some aspects related to Whiteness Studies and Afro-American feminist thought as, for example, hooks' notion

of the “Oppositional Gaze” (1992). The second section presents the reworking of these theories in a more specifically British context through the theories of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Avtar Brah. Their understanding of the notions of “diaspora” and “chronotope” allow me to establish links between these concepts and that of “transposition”, that constitutes the cornerstone of Braidotti’s theory of nomadic ethics.

The subsequent three chapters centre on the textual analysis. Each chapter deals with each of the three “Books” of *Blonde Roots* and seeks to determine the features of Evaristo’s reversed racial representation and their consequent transpositions. Chapter two concentrates on the mocking persiflage of the enslaver’s dominant discourse displayed in “Book Two”. It contends that by dismantling the enslaver’s arbitrary construction of truth and knowledge as well as his essentialist racial categories, Evaristo succeeds in transposing racial alterity. Chapter three examines “Book One” proposing that Doris’s double journey through Londolo’s sites and her childhood memories transpose conventional representations of diasporic sites. The combination of Doris’s sardonic observations of Ambossan society and her reminiscences of England, often presented as a distorted fairy tale, underscore Doris’s self-awareness and resistance. Through Doris’s critical observations, Evaristo remoulds stereotypes addressing gender specific concerns and subverting racial and social conventions. Chapter four investigates the transposition of difference in “Book Three”. Although racial difference becomes central in Bwana’s plantation “Home Sweet Home”, the slaves’ resistance — mostly organized by women— and contestation occupies an equally important place. If racial difference is symbolised as poison to their lives, female slaves enact an affirmative solidarity that counteracts this negative, hegemonic and “toxic”

understanding of difference. This includes alternative relationships and new forms of motherhood that actually end up empowering Doris.

Finally, my conclusion deals with Evaristo's "Postscript" to the novel. As a message in a bottle, it returns from the past to outline the fate of the protagonists and to bring a message that is still relevant in the present. Blurring the geographical lines between Great Britain, Europe and America, the colour lines between black and white, as well as the time lines between past and present, Evaristo invites the reader to dwell within that place where the "boundaries between imagination and reality are erased" (Kristeva 1991: 188).



2. YINKA SHONIBARE, *DOUBLE DUTCH* (1994)

2. Challenging “the Colour Line”: Theories of Representation and Transposition

In this first chapter, my aim is to present how the main postcolonial and feminist theories engage with the concepts of representation and transposition through which I will read *Blonde Roots*. Although I primarily use a postcolonial framework, I am aware of the importance of the concept of representation for other philosophical and cultural currents, such as post-structuralism and postmodernism, in which the politics of representation have played a crucial role. In fact, Evaristo freely uses, as I shall show, literary and non literary devices which are related to both philosophical and cultural theories. They intermingle and converge in *Blonde Roots* but are by no means sufficient to explain Evaristo’s signifying practices displayed in the novel.

This preoccupation is also clearly reflected in Yinka Shonibare’s *Double Dutch* (1994) which projects Shonibare’s concerns to challenge fixed cultural definitions as he juxtaposes fifty Dutch wax printed cotton canvases dissecting the multiple variations of what is considered as the quintessential African fabric. As previously mentioned, these cloths have a complex history rooted in the colonial routes of the British Empire. By presenting them in a series of isolated canvases, Shonibare draws attention to the constructedness of their origins. But this presentation is not merely a matter of various mimetic multiplications of the same theme (Braidotti 2006: 5). By re-framing and re-presenting them anew, Shonibare goes beyond their traditional function as cultural signifiers, transforming them into catalysts of new interconnections and creative ideas. *Blonde Roots* similarly unfolds a series of images from which imaginative and new experimental signifying practices emerge.

Bearing that in mind, *Blonde Roots* displays a dialogue between postcolonial and feminist theories, especially those that consider representations of alterity. Evaristo's blurring of the "colour line" and her rewriting of the transatlantic slave trade draws into sharp focus the experience of racial difference. But, in spite of voicing both the enslaver as well as the enslaved, Evaristo clearly favours the female perspective of the narration of events. In fact, she emphasises the affirmative response and contestation of her protagonist leaving behind the traditional victimization of women as doubly oppressed and colonized (Annex 7.1). Following Doris's pursuit of freedom, it becomes clear that the carefully constructed stereotypes and clichés which sustain the assumptions of racial and gender differences, and which still have such a powerful hold over our society, depend on arbitrary forces. In fact, this issue lies at the heart of postcolonial theory. Most, if not all, literary criticism concerned with the study of colonial texts and their postcolonial responses seems to deal with the notion of representation. Indeed, it is possible to claim that "colonialism was a matter of representation" (McLeod 2007: 5).

Because of this, postcolonial theory approaches the concept of representation from its double meaning. The term not only denotes the depiction of reality but also appoints to the act of "speaking for", that is represent, someone. *Blonde Roots* clearly reflects this dovetailed issue. In rewriting the transatlantic slave trade and in reversing the colour line, Evaristo portrays and presents a new textual, aesthetic, philosophical and historical reality. She thus engages in identity politics which were traditionally the privilege of the empowered white elite. As bell hooks explains in "Postmodern Blackness", the discourse of this white elite "created the idea of the 'primitive' and promoted the notion of an 'authentic' experience, seeing as 'natural' those expressions of black life which conformed to a pre-existing pattern or stereotype" (1990: 28). As

hooks points out, representations of whites by blacks are still very rare and, while a commodification of blackness can be easily found, whiteness remains a comparatively under-theorized area (1990). Similarly, hooks' claim that politics of crossover can be subversive of racial stereotypes has still to be taken into account in spite of the lately apparent increase and commodification of ethnic narratives. In the same line, Evaristo observes that Black writers still have problems, not so much to enter, but to remain in the market (Annex 7.1). In this context, Evaristo's narrative invites, as hooks demands, to abandon essentialisms and universalisms challenging racism and binary oppositions.

This position also draws attention to the more political meaning of representation in the sense that one who acts as representative of a group or stands in place of another who cannot speak for oneself. That is, the representation of people and their reality is implicated in power inequalities and the subordination of what Gayatri Spivak called the "subaltern" (2010). Spivak asks whether it is possible, especially for women, to become autonomous agents with an audible voice within the discursive relationship of colonial discourse. As I will show, this last theoretical approach is negotiated and challenged throughout the novel by means of the multiple and sometimes hidden forms of female resistance. Departing from the idea that a single strategy of resistance is not possible, Evaristo asserts new forms of agency and self representation coming in line with the concept of "transposition" proposed by Braidotti, "dislodging difference from its hegemonic position as an instrument of world-historical systems of domination, exclusion, and disqualification" (2011: 226). In the following pages, I consider these different theoretical approaches that converge in Evaristo's narrative.

2.1. Representation and the “Oppositional Gaze”

Any postcolonial analysis of representation must necessarily depart from the ideas of the radical psychoanalyst and colonial activist Frantz Fanon, the first to interrelate the psychological effects of colonialism on the oppressed peoples and their further effects on their anticolonial struggle and subsequent liberation. In his works *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) he describes the fatal consequences of racism and the colonial mechanisms of otherness on colonised subjects and their psyche.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon defines and articulates how colonial and racial oppression impact on the mind and body of subjects considered by the colonial powers as “others”. As a psychiatrist influenced by psychoanalysis, he uses Freudian concepts to explain the internal assimilation of the process of otherness to which particularly black people are subjected. Fanon argues through autobiographical references that blacks are not only confronted with a distorted representation of themselves, but also with the fact that this distorted otherness is internalized, having an effect on their self-understanding and identity. The colonized subject adopts the “white mask” of the colonizer in order to fulfil the expectations created by their false representations; a process that is thoroughly depicted in *Blonde Roots*. In the famously quoted chapter “The Fact of Blackness”, Fanon reveals his awareness of this hidden mechanism of colonial domination and explains how the interpellation “Look, a Negro!” acts on his self-consciousness:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. (2008: 83)

Hence Fanon seeks the need of a psychological change in the colonized, interrelating anticolonial resistance not only through unifying the black self, but also reinforcing national identity in the emergent post-colonial states. This second aspect of Fanon's work and the transformative nature of his struggle will enormously influence thinkers and artists throughout the colonized world.

A second fundamental view on the issue of representation is Edward Said's construction of "the Oriental" in Western imagination, a theory he elaborates from the foucaultian notion of "discourse" and "discursive practices" in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978). If Fanon "steps in" politically for the colonised subject, Said looks at colonialism from the coloniser's perspective dissecting his way of seeing and interpreting the world in what he calls "colonial discourse". In this regard, Said's central thesis in *Orientalism* is the existence of a Western discourse based upon a very distinct form of representation and knowledge of what Westerners called the "Oriental". Drawing upon Saussure and Derrida, Said considers that there is no delivered presence in language but a '*re-presence*' or a re-presentation which is used to displace the real subject, in this case the Orient. In this regard, Western oriental representations function as a network of knowledge and interests about the Orient expressed in a discourse "which in some way is filtered into Western consciousness and into general culture" (Said 2003: 6).

The corpus of knowledge, transmitted through these re-presentations, does not simply disappear with the independence of the colonies. As McLeod observes, Said has not only demonstrated in his work that the modes of representation common to colonialism have continued after decolonisation. Actually, they are still intrinsic to Western Civilization and the contemporary world (2000: 22). This is, in fact, an issue

Evaristo addresses in her work. As Said observes, Orientalism permitted European culture to gain “in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (2003: 3). Thus, Said argues that Oriental representations and colonial discourse also transform the colonizer and form an inherent part of the colonizer’s psyche and culture. Furthermore, they form a binary dichotomy in which the colonizer is the positive actor but needs desperately the negative other for his own performance of positive self-definition.

In particular, what made the Orient visible and coherent to the Western discourse were the various techniques of representation and modes of otherness. These principally centred on identifying the “other” through several stereotypes in which his/her difference holds a negative charge. According to Said, stereotypes are simplified and standardized conceptions or images invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a certain group or community. They are concrete materializations of these negative colonial or racial representations. Despite presenting stereotypes as a form of social control—in this case, of the colonizer over the colonized—Said observes that standards and conventions do not remain fixed in time. Because of this, he establishes a difference between what he calls “manifest” (its specific expression in a certain epoch, which could change) and “latent Orientalism” (2003: 201-225). The latter is regarded as unchangeable and functions as a permanent subtext of the political discourse of Western cultures. Interestingly, this idea of an enduring “latent Orientalism” becomes evident in *Blonde Roots*. By means of chronotopia and gender specific transpositions, Evaristo incorporates many contemporary references into Doris’s world of slaves and enslavers establishing a continuum between past and present. The novel’s last words: “In the twenty-first century, Bwana’s descendants still

own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside” (BR: 261) suggest that Orientalism, or specifically racial forms of othering, are still structurally present in our contemporary society.

The Orient becomes a mental construct that is stereotyped timeless, unchanging and eternal and, thus, opposed to the idea of historical progress in the Western system of knowledge. The concept Orient is therefore fixed as a site of primitivism, permanent backwardness and degeneration, features which are opposed to what in the West is considered as the norm. Its alterity marks the Orient as something exotic, strange, obscure and dangerous. In addition, the Oriental is considered savage and lazy and therefore inferior. They comply neither with Western gender roles nor do they respond to the Western codes of behavior. Moreover, the Orient is regarded as exotically feminine and, consequently, passive and, above all, submissive, ready to be penetrated, cultivated and finally domesticated (McLeod 2000: 44-46).

For this reason, oriental peoples are not able to represent themselves; their representation is done by the West in order to justify conquest and establish systems of administration and instruction. This opens up the two meanings of representation I referred to earlier. Said starts his study with Marx’s famous quotation from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (2003: xxvii). In Said’s re-reading, Marx’s words acquire a very different quality to Fanon’s revolutionary reference to Marx used in *Black Skin, White*

Mask. Said seems not only to imply little resistance on the Orient's side but also a strict division between the world of the colonizer and that of the colonized.²

Said's arguments have been challenged by many critics.³ Feminist critics like Spivak point at Said's lack of attention towards gender differences. Likewise, Said has been criticised for ignoring the issue of resistance against colonialism. This critique has been specially related to what many see as his misreading of Foucault. For Foucault subjects are interrelated and mutually influenced. Their discursive relation implies that they also support and even depend on each other. Colonizer and colonised are therefore not only mere adversaries in a binary system, as Said seems to suggest. On the contrary, their relationship opens up a whole range of possibilities as Homi Bhabha affirms (Childs 1997: 148).

In fact, the discursive relationship between the various members of colonial societies is one of the key points in Homi Bhabha's work. Also departing from Foucault's and Fanon's ideas, he argues that in colonial discourse "subjects are always disproportionately placed in opposition or domination through the symbolic decentring of multiple power relations which play the role of support as well as target or adversary" (2008: 103). For that reason and contrarily to Said, Bhabha does not rely on the static binary division of East and West or colonizer and colonized, which leaves neither room for any self-representation or negotiation between both parties, nor of resistance and thus, of possible change. On the contrary, Bhabha analyses the

²In his afterword to the revised edition of *Orientalism* published in 2003, Said clarifies his position conceding ways of agency to the oriental subject and admitting that "the subaltern can speak, as the history of liberation movements in the twentieth century eloquently attests" (2003: 335).

³See among many others John MacKenzie's *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995); Sara Mills' gendered critique in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1992) and Dennis Porter's "Orientalism and its Problems" (1993).

similarities between colonizer and colonised and, employing Derrida's deconstructive insights, claims that "what [needs] to be questioned [...] is the *mode of representation of otherness*" (2008: 97). In *Blonde Roots*, Bernardine Evaristo precisely deals with the "range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (Bhabha 2008: 96). In examining the relationship between coloniser and colonised through the prism of some of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytical concepts, Bhabha draws attention to notions as the "uncanny", "disavowal", "ambivalence" and "mimicry" among others, and develops his own theoretical approach through the concepts of "hybridity" and "the Third Space", which I will employ in my analysis of *Blonde Roots*.

Although Bhabha agrees with Said that "cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (2008: 17) and that the Oriental is constructed as part of a degenerate population which needs to be civilized through the higher moral and material knowledge of Western Civilization (2008: 101), he aims at analyzing the process of colonial subjectification and how it can be recognized and/or questioned. Additionally, Bhabha explores how colonial identity involves a process of identification and disavowal (Childs 1997: 124). In this regard, a key notion to understand Bhabha's approach is ambivalence. Originally taken from Freud, he uses this concept to denote the dual relationship between colonizers and colonized. Departing from Fanon's self-reflective analysis of his encounter with the white man's eyes and its consequent effects on his psyche, Bhabha conveys identification as a "production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (2008: 64).

Following Lacan, Bhabha explains that the Self, in order to construct or define its own psychic image of identification, needs the other. Simultaneously, it is confronted

with difference. The moment of desire of resemblance supposes therefore a threat and a rupture for the wholeness of the image of the Self who is, thus, rejected. In transferring these mechanisms of ambivalence to the colonial subjects, Bhabha refers not only to the traditional rejection of the colonized considered as different, but also to a recognition authenticated through the negation and disavowal of its otherness (2008: 70-74). Furthermore, colonial identity and its representational space lie between the binary divisions of white/black, colonizer/colonized or self/other enabling a menace to colonial authority. Colonialism's necessity to fix the other's identity derives from this shifting representational space. It is from this point of view that Bhabha ultimately constructs his own theory of colonial discourse based upon the ambivalent performance of identification.

Most importantly, ambivalence draws attention to the recurrent use of stereotypes in the establishment of a certain colonial discourse. Bhabha considers the stereotype neither as a misrepresentation, as it is argued by Said in *Orientalism* (2008: 103), nor the result of simple ignorance or lack of knowledge. On the contrary, he links the stereotype directly to relations of power/knowledge resorting to Foucault but reformulating Said's arguments in *Orientalism*. In line with Said, Bhabha observes that besides the stereotype's function of fixing certain images in place and time without need of further proof, stereotypes have to be repeated constantly as if to assure their validity and authenticity. But in his interpretation, Bhabha reads colonial stereotype as a fetish. In Bhabha's conception, colonial stereotypes move between the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal. Like the Freudian fetish, these stereotypes function between delight and fear. Fetishism, in Freudian terms, mirrors both "the anxiety of castration and sexual difference as well as a normalization of that difference

and disturbance” (2008: 106). The fetish, like the stereotype, forms part of the subject’s fantasy in which the desire for a pure origin is always threatened by its division (2008: 107). That is to say, in this process of identification exists a desire for originality which is simultaneously threatened by the differences of race, colour and culture and, consequently, this process is common to both colonizer and colonized (2008: 107).

In this sense, Bhabha defines the stereotype as an ambivalent, contradictory and paradoxical mode of representation of knowledge and power in which “otherness” is articulated through racial and sexual differences that result from the game between seeing and being seen, masking and fixing difference as well as the continuous shift between the desire of recognition and the necessity of disavowal. The coordinates of these processes in which stereotypes are inscribed is a grounding feature of *Blonde Roots*. Evaristo portrays the ambivalence of these representations in the multiple stereotypes which circulate in Doris’s world. She depicts them in detail but also subverts them as she reverses and inverts them continually showing them as arbitrary and artificial constructions. This becomes especially visible in “Book Two” with the enslaver’s figure, as I will explain in the following chapter.

The ambivalence of the stereotyping process takes Bhabha to reread and rework Lacan’s notion of mimicry. Since the articulation of alterity occurs within fantasies of origin and identity, Bhabha explains that the effects of ambivalence and mimicry also make plausible a negotiation and transgression within colonial discourse (2008: 96-120). Bhabha links mimicry with mockery observing that mimicry relies on resemblance (mimesis) in a way that the colonized mirrors the colonizer while always remaining different (Childs 1997: 130). Colonial discourse aims at constructing the colonised as simultaneously similar and different to the coloniser. This is a goal that can

never be completely achieved, as the colonised stay in a somewhat deferred position. Mimicry derives from the fact that colonial authorities relied on native peoples to work on their behalf. In the case of the English Empire, they had to learn the English language and customs but, as Bhabha puts it, “to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English” (2008: 125). Eventually colonised subjects become a menace to the authority of the colonisers (McLeod 2000: 54). Bhabha observes that mimicry constitutes one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge (2008: 122). Equally, he defines colonial mimicry as the “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (2008: 122). Actually, “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” and what emerges between this repetitions (mimesis) and mimicry is rather a “*writing*, a mode of representation”, that mocks or parodies the colonial power (2008: 125-126). Furthermore, Bhabha argues that through mimicry the colonized ultimately refuses to be a colonial representative or to embody their colonial ambitions: “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ —through a process of writing and repetition— is the final irony of partial representation” (2008: 126). Bhabha’s ideas on mimicry become especially relevant for my reading of *Blonde Roots*, as the protagonist Doris is actually one of these colonial subjects. When Doris becomes Bwana’s personal secretary, as she is made responsible for his accounts, she develops a task which is intended to propagate “colonial power and knowledge”. But Doris is not a slavish or disempowered individual; on the contrary, she cunningly uses her literacy and her knowledge of the family business in her favour. Her position, which we may relate to what Bhabha calls the “anomalous gaze of otherness” (2008: 127), allows her to disclose the ambivalent and contradictory workings of colonial discourse.

Another important concept in Bhabha's theory which relates to my reading of the novel is the concept of hybridity. As we have seen, Bhabha suggests that colonial discourse is never wholly in the control of the colonizer, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (2008: 153). In Bhabha's argumentation, this gap between these two positions opens up a site of resistance. This site defers binary oppositions and displaces colonial authority. In this context and in the practice of domination, every concept or idea that the colonizer brings to the colonized will be renewed, reinterpreted in the light of the Other's culture. To put it another way, Bhabha believes that the consequences of wielding colonial power is "the *production* of hybridization" (2008: 160). He explains that hybridity "reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other's 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority —its rules of recognition" (2008: 162). Consequently this enables a change of perspective in colonial representation because this hybridization enables a form of subversion and inverts "the conditions of dominance into grounds of intervention" (2008: 160). More importantly, hybridity questions binary divisions which are opposed but linked through an "in-between" or a "Third Space" (2008: 56) in which cultural identities are free to be translated and negotiated anew. Moreover, this Third Space has to be understood as a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (2008: 55) in which all cultural statements and systems are constructed and therefore does not allow for "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures" (2008: 55).

It is important to note here that this Third Space, through which hybridity operates, also has a temporal dimension because these cultural hybridities emerge in

moments of historical transformation and, more importantly, they restage the past introducing other cultural temporalities (2008: 3). Actually, those who live in these in-between spaces and sites of transition, that is “beyond” or on the “borderlines” (2008: 3), as Bhabha says, are located in the “moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (2008: 2). Ultimately, “theses ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood —singular or communal— that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2008: 2). This is to say, hybrid sites enable us to rethink the dominant ways through which society represents history, identity and community (McLeod 2000: 217). Bhabha claims therefore that we should go beyond conventional modes of representation, narratives of origin and initial subjectivities focusing instead on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences (2008: 2). My reading of *Blonde Roots* illustrates some of these ideas perfectly; it can actually be considered as a narrative that effectively negotiates the powers of cultural difference in a transhistorical site (Bhabha 2008: 13). Moreover, the novel gives voice and agency to the oppressed within their own hybrid sites, as seen especially in Book Three, where the authoritative representations are questioned. Likewise, *Blonde Roots* relocates the notions of home and community and clearly stresses, in Bhabha’s words, “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (2008: 18).

Like Said, Bhabha has also been criticized for not giving sufficient attention to the variables of gender and for ignoring specific historical and geographical contexts.⁴

⁴See, for instance, Arif Dirlik’s analysis in “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism” (1994), Robert Young’s *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990) or

But, as I shall show in the following chapters, Evaristo chooses a protagonist in which these variables merge. What is more, her protagonist could also be regarded as a “subaltern” subject for being a female slave. Spivak’s ideas on subalternity and patriarchy provide an adequate theoretical frame to position *Blonde Roots*. Spivak coined the term “subaltern” in her well-known essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, originally published in 1988, where she questions Western academic systems of knowledge about colonised people and societies as well as the position and assumptions from left wing intellectuals and First World feminists about the subaltern. Spivak relates this term to the negation of female consciousness and agency within colonial discourse by Western intellectuals: “the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade” (Spivak 2010: 27).

In this sense, Spivak participates in the discussion and the increasing awareness among feminist critics (especially those of the “Third World”) of the distinctive position of women within colonial discourse and hence in Western colonialist representations. These critics argue that women are doubly affected by, first, the colonial reality and secondly by patriarchal relationships. That is to say, women are considered to be subjected to a “double colonisation” (McLeod 2000 175-189) which makes it impossible for them to actively resist colonialism and represent themselves freely. Similarly to Said and Bhabha, Spivak is interested in showing how meaning and thus knowledge intersect with power and power structures. Moreover, she pledges for a more complex analysis of the many conflicting subject-positions that women are required to negotiate under the intersecting structures of patriarchy and imperialism. As subalterns, women are positioned simultaneously within several different discourses of power and

Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) for a gendered specific analysis.

of resistance that makes necessary the recognition of a multiplicity of intersecting political, economic, sexual and historiographic strands (Childs 1997: 162-64).

Spivak claims therefore that the postcolonial critic should be especially aware of this shift between the two meanings of representation to which I have referred earlier: “to stand in for” politically and “to represent or portray”. Actually, in the process to record and/or retrieve the subaltern’s voice, several kinds of representation come into play. In portraying the so called subaltern, the Western intellectual is standing in for him or her and simultaneously performing a self-representation. Spivak illustrates this point in her detailed analysis of the English translations of the German original *vertreten* (to stand in for or to represent) and *darstellen* (to portray or represent) part of the famous paragraph from Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Spivak affirms that what must be necessarily exposed is the complicity of both meanings of *vertreten* and *darstellen* (2010: 31) and the critic should be very much aware that “the staging of the world in representation —its scene of writing, its *Darstellung* —dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes’, paternal proxies, agents of power— *Vertretung*” (2010: 33). In her view, the intellectual’s main goal should be to combine both versions of representation in their analysis rather than “to reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire” (2010: 33). This new position can be seen in *Blonde Roots*, as Evaristo not only incorporates in her narrative both versions of representation (*Vertretung* und *Darstellung*), she also positions her protagonist in-between the multiple intersecting strands mentioned earlier. In bestowing Doris with the awareness of the internal interactions of power relations and solidarity on both sides of the “colour line”, Evaristo avoids victimization and enables contestation. In this sense, she engages with an affirmative re-imagination or *Vorstellung* of the subaltern.

Any reading of *Blonde Roots*, especially from a gender perspective must necessarily be informed by “Whiteness Studies” as well as by Afro-American feminist thought. Whiteness Studies derive partly from the assumption that the “white race” is, like the “black race”, an equally constructed and stereotyped ethnic category. As Richard Dyer, one of the initiators of Whiteness Studies, reminds us: “this fantasy makes whiteness synonymous with goodness” (1997: 169). Moreover, “white” becomes in this hegemonic discourse the norm of what is considered as good and by which others are judged, that is whiteness functions within colonial and neo-colonial representations as an “unmarked marker” (Dyer 1997: 199), considered to be neutral, natural and invisible, and which therefore not only gives control to whites over their self representation but also over the representation of all the others who differ from that norm (Dyer 1997: 1). Moreover, Dyer claims that by learning to view our own subject positions as racialized white people, it would be possible to work towards antiracist forms of whiteness (1997: 1).

Similarly, one of bell hooks’ main interests is to critically examine the concept of “white race”, how “whiteness” is perceived by black people and how it is filtered into their imagination. She stresses the fact that in many postcolonial writings there remains a fascination with “blackness” very similar to that of the colonial imperialist traveller and that criticism shows very little interest in representations of whiteness in the Black culture (1997: 166). This is a point that is evidently contested in *Blonde Roots* as its black-white reversal subverts essentialist notions on whiteness and adopts a peculiar gaze upon the constructedness of regimes of representation based on racial differences. In the same line, bell hooks reminds us of the enslaver’s power to punish black slaves only for looking. These strategies of domination repressed black peoples and produced

“an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire of an oppositional gaze” (1992: 116). In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992: 115-31), bell hooks stresses this confrontational gesture of resistance and challenge to authority. She explains that black people learned to look a certain way in order to resist (1992: 115). What is more, hooks highlights the possibility of claiming the visual field rather than looking down or being the object of visual inspection. In this sense, the oppositional gaze becomes a highly political act that allows black people “to assert agency by claiming and cultivating awareness” (1992: 116).

Finally, the acclaimed novelist Toni Morrison shares this goal to interrogate and problematise racial categories. Well known for her rewriting of the traditional histories of slavery in the USA, Morrison was not only one of the first writers to draw her attention to the problematic of “whiteness” (1992) but also to write her novels from a gendered viewpoint. As I will show in subsequent chapters, Evaristo constantly interweaves literary references to works that are concerned with black identity and slavery. Morrison’s slave narrative *Beloved* (1987) is one of Evaristo’s main intertextual resources. Similarly to *Beloved*’s protagonist Sethe, Doris’s story merges memory and fantasy to cope with the horrors of slavery. Interestingly, in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison argues that: “The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behaviour of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does on the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters” (1992: 12). Morrison’s main project is therefore “to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (1992: 90). In this sense, she equally

proposes to contest the enslaver's dominant gaze through an "oppositional gaze" which, as seen later, will be a recurring feature of Doris's various attempts to resist domination.

Looking back (through the recreation of memories) and looking at (through the articulation of resistance) concurs with Braidotti's conception of "oppositional consciousness", one that "actively works toward the creation of alternatives by working through the negative instance and cultivating relations that are conducive to the ethical transmutation of values" (2011 286). Braidotti contends that this kind of consciousness is inherent to diasporic subjects of all kinds. Their potentially negative sense of loss can be transformed into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances in a way that the negative charge of belonging to different locations can be transposed (2011: 288). This suggests that, in the light of the increasing diasporic populations, the ideas regarding the politics of representation must be reexamined and reworked, as I do in the following section by focusing on the concepts of "Diaspora" and the "Black Atlantic" and "transposition".

2.2. Diaspora, the Black Atlantic and Transposition

Although I have dealt with the concept of representation in the foundational postcolonial theories in the first section, these theories only illuminate part of the novel's subtext. In this section, I will look at some British based critics like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Avtar Brah who conceive their theories in the context of diaspora. Their work can be read, on the one hand, as a result of the changing reality of Great Britain due to the mass migration period initiated in the second half of twentieth century and,

on the other, in relation to the increasing awareness of the diaspora experience as cultural catalyst.

British cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall understands representation as a key idea in cultural studies in that it shows that reality is never experienced directly, but always through symbolic categories made available by society (2011: 1-11). Following Said and Bhabha and, drawing on Fanon and Foucault, he claims that the concepts of cultural identity and race are to be considered as discursive constructs. He argues that we should think of identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1994: 392) and continues to explain that practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write. That is to say, all subjects speak from a “particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific, therefore, what we say is always ‘in context’, positioned” (1994: 392).

This approach becomes especially clear in Hall’s landmark essay “New Ethnicities” (1988) where he engages with current black cultural politics and black self-representation mainly in the British context. Hall’s main thesis is that black cultural politics underwent a shift in the 1980s “from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself” (1996: 444). In other words, black cultural politics moved from justifying the necessity of representing an essential black subject in confrontation to the essential white subject to the increasing awareness of the existence of a politics of representation of subjects articulated within multiple positions in society.

Hall argues that this transformation in black cultural politics is due to two aspects which are of importance for my analysis of *Blonde Roots*. Firstly, Hall considers

the theoretical encounter between these black politics and the discourses of a Eurocentric —mainly white— critical theory of culture as a kind of origin for this transformation. Secondly, and more importantly, Hall observes that black is —like white— essentially a politically and culturally constructed category. This awareness marks what he calls “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (1996: 444). In this sense, black politics of representation, move beyond the opposition and substitution of the essentially white subject by the essentially black subject. From this first conception of race, Hall moves on to an assumption of race as something historically located in articulation.

The notion of “articulation” is in fact a key theme in Hall’s theoretical corpus; he believes that it constitutes “a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures” (Grossberg 1996: 141-142). Thus, in his understanding of race, Hall considers that “the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity” (1996: 445). This new awareness of the multiple dimensions of all subjects implies a necessary rethinking of how to conceive political contestation. In this new context, a politics of resistance should be possible “without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities” and works therefore “with and through difference” (1996: 445). In this sense, Hall links the politics of representation directly with political contestation.

Hall introduces the notion of ethnicity as a key element that participates in the construction of subjectivity and identity as, in his view, all identities can be considered as “*ethnically* located and are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (1996:

448). Moreover, by locating the hegemonic cultural and political discourse of “Englishness” as another ethnic discourse, it is possible to consider the multiple, diverse and different ethnicities of the margins and periphery as something positive and constitutive of a new notion of Englishness. This permits Hall to envisage a real point of contestation in the new black cultural politics not only because ethnicity and difference are considered as something positive but also because they are constructed without displacing and disavowing other ethnicities as the hegemonic discourse of Englishness had done so far. As I will show in the textual analysis, Evaristo herself is very much interested to show this point since her protagonist Doris repeatedly draws upon the various ethnicities that compound the slaves’ society in order to highlight their diversity and contest the enslaver’s homogenising discourse of pure origins.

Another element that becomes relevant for this shift in black cultural politics is the concept of diaspora, that is “the awareness of the black experience as a diaspora experience, and the consequences which this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and ‘cut-and-mix’ —in short, the process of cultural diaspora-ization [...] which it implies” (1996: 448). One of the characteristics of the new politics of representation is its contestation of how hegemonic power constructs identity and its rootedness in the past. But, as Hall observes, that past is “complexly mediated and transformed by memory, fantasy and desire” (1996: 449). If this assertion is meant to undermine the hegemonic understanding of what is believed to be English, then again, the relation to the past cannot simply be a matter of recovering some ancestral roots. In Hall’s view, this past has to be mediated through the categories of the present; and therefore the diaspora experience is required as a transformational factor.

Hall ends his essay by reflecting on the question of aesthetic value in recent black cultural representations and suggests that these can no longer be judged by canonical cultural categories. On the contrary, they are texts that cross the “frontiers between gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class” (1996: 450). He argues thus that those new black cultural productions implicitly carry “a continuous critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representation, above all, the regimes of representation” (1996: 449-50). Although written thirty years later, *Blonde Roots* engages with the shifts and transformations mentioned by Hall as Doris’s life is “crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity” (Hall 1996: 445) and participates of this diaspora experience. In order to apprehend better the implications of this “process of diaspora-ization” prior to my analysis of *Blonde Roots*, it is pertinent to offer a closer at some theoretical approaches to the concept of diaspora.

The term “diaspora” is normally associated with communities and peoples who move through and between different locations and, as explained below, it is also related to the dislocations which result from these movements. Although the term derives etymologically from the Greek —it originally meant “to sow” or “to scatter”— and was first used to refer to the Jewish exile around the world, the notion of diaspora has been recently adapted by postcolonial scholars and artists to refer to the forced and voluntary migrations set in motion by the British Empire (Procter 2007: 151). Through the study of colonial strategies and imperialism, it became clear that “colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world” (Procter 2007: 151). Far more important were the world-wide movements which derived from it, and the dispersal of people related to the practices of slavery and indenture to provide labour for

the plantation and trading economy. Robin Cohen explains that those communities of people “acknowledge that ‘the old country’ —a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore— always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (1997, ix). Significantly, this claim changes through and within the generational differences of diasporic communities, who eventually became an integral part of the nation, once these countries gained their independence.

Some scholars, like Clifford (1994), note the slippages and confusion between the concepts of “diaspora”, “migrant” and “postcolonial” as theoretical concepts and as distinct historical experiences. Hence he considers the notion of diaspora rather as a process which evolves through place and time than as a descriptive tool, as considered by other authors (Kalran 2005: 11-13). On the other hand, postcolonial critics, like Hall himself, or Avtar Brah, to whom I shall return below, have interrogated the collectively shared sense of diaspora as potentially marginalising certain groups inside their limits such as women, lesbian and gay people (McLeod 2000; Wisker 2007). Implicit in this new understanding of diaspora is also a critique of Bhabha’s notion of the “Third Space”. Diaspora criticism makes it clear that each individual is continually in dialogue “with a varied past, history, family and set of homelands that could produce a sense of dislocation and confusion rather than of celebratory hybridity and contribution to dynamic cultural change” (Wisker 2007: 27). Elleke Boehmer, for instance, reinterprets Bhabha’s idea of negotiation arguing that interaction between colonizers and colonized took place much earlier and steadier than believed (2002: 1-12). In this sense, concepts and processes of resistance and negotiation should be revised already in relation to the interactions of the colonial period, and not exclusively as related to those who came to the metropolis in the postcolonial period or where displaced in colonial times.

Consequently it is a mistake to believe that migration from other countries with a history of colonialism has only happened since the 1950s or that Britain was culturally and ethnically homogeneous before the Second World War (McLeod 2000: 206). Actually, this is the point from which more recent diaspora theories start. In this sense, diaspora challenges the supremacy of national paradigms and the relationship between minorities and the national states in which they live. To them, diaspora implies not only a traversing of physical terrain by individuals or groups of people; they rather understand it as a theoretical concept: “a way of thinking or of representing the world” (Procter 2007: 151).

In this context, Hall equally argues that diaspora should not be understood as “those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return” (1994: 401). On the contrary, for Hall the notion of diaspora should be based upon “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (1994: 401-402). Hall finds that this understanding of diaspora is represented most evidently by the Caribbean people, since they have endured continuous displacements of slavery, colonisation and conquest. Moreover, these people came from different countries, tribes, languages, and gods and, consequently, each of them had to negotiate their economic, political and cultural dependency with the metropolis on their own terms. Hall suggests that, even though the insertion through slavery and transportation into the plantation economy of Western Capitalism suppressed the direct access to their multiple cultural roots, it also unified these people across their cultural differences. In the case of the Caribbean, these common differences are to be set into relation to three historical and cultural axes. Hall

refers to them as “presences” —*Présence Africaine, Présence Européenne and Présence Américaine* (1994: 398)— which negotiate creolisations, assimilations and syncretisms in a continuous dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition (1994: 400-401), a point that Evaristo clearly develops in the last section of *Blonde Roots*.

Hall concludes that Caribbean identities have therefore to be thought in terms of the dialogic relationship between the vectors of similarity and continuity and that of difference and rupture (1994: 395-96). In this context, Hall understands cultural identity as something historical which undergoes transformation. This constant transformation, reproduction and, lastly, imaginative recreation of identity through multiple negotiations of difference of the Caribbean becomes a source for new cultural forms “young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this ‘diaspora aesthetics’ and its formation in the post-colonial experience” (Hall 1994: 402).

Regarding *Blonde Roots*, these theoretical considerations around ethnicity, diaspora and their implication for new aesthetic experiences becomes particularly relevant for two reasons. On the one hand, Evaristo, as a writer of mixed Nigerian and British descent is influenced by the past migration history of both parents and ancestors and forms part of that minority of artists which, in Hall’s words, are aware of this newly apprehended post-colonial and diasporic background. Moreover, the African slaves’ diaspora forms part of those hidden histories that Evaristo, as a writer, feels committed to represent (Annex 7.1). On the other hand, *Blonde Roots* mirrors all the aforementioned diasporic features through its detailed description of the protagonist’s experiences across the Middle Passage and her subsequent quest for freedom.

Moreover, her historically faithful portrayal of the slaves' experience paradigmatically exemplifies Hall's claim about the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, that is, the recognition of hybridity.

This more spatial notion of diaspora, in which people negotiate their positioning between a hegemonic power and its margins, is taken up, among others, by two British scholars, Paul Gilroy and Avtar Brah, whose ideas have illuminated my reading of *Blonde Roots*. Like Hall, they also stress the aspects of cultural diversity and community as well as their relationship with an imagined and "narrated" past. In this regard, both argue that the processes of diaspora affect the roots of indigenous people as much as the routes of the itinerant subjects in the post-colonial world order (Braidotti 2006: 59). Likewise, they insist on the notion of a shared and continuously shifting space which effectively challenges the dominant power mechanisms through its dynamism. Whereas Paul Gilroy expresses this acknowledgement through a temporal-spatial entity called "the Black Atlantic" (1993), Avtar Brah insists upon a "diasporic space" in which various axes of differentiation, such as gender, sex, race and ethnicity, coexist and interact affecting both migrant and native population.

Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) analyses diverse forms of racism and anti-racism in Britain. In looking closely at the discourses of race, its interrelations with class, and ethnicity, he makes it clear that complex networks of "social and political subordination and de-subordination, resistance and negotiation" (2002: 5) coexist in contemporary Britain. Whereas blacks are traditionally represented in British politics and culture as external to and estranged from the imagined community that is the nation, Gilroy insists upon the existence of black cultures whose richness and oppositional practice surpass the dimensions of narrow ideas of anti-racism

(2002: 201). Moreover, and in line with Stuart Hall's argumentation, he relates this idea of cultural diversity to the awareness of British blacks as forming part of a diaspora. Like Hall, Gilroy thinks that it is particularly the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean which inspire black Britons to new creative processes adapting them to their British experiences and meanings (2002: 202). In the same way, he understands diaspora as an alternative to the various essential racial, ethnic or national conceptions and representations which were present in British cultural productions and politics during the late eighties (2002: 203). As Gilroy argues further, rather than being subjected to a process of acculturation as suggested and demanded by the political mainstream, they display a complex combination of resistances and negotiations drawing on their plurality of black histories and politics linked to what Gilroy understands as cultural syncretism (2002: 204). Actually, he argues that "culture is not a fixed and impermeable feature of social relations. Its forms change, develop, combine and are dispersed in historical processes" (2002: 294).

In his view, it is necessary to be aware that Black British people are not only connected culturally and politically to other black peoples and cultures, they form also part of the social relations of Britain. Hence, British culture has to be seen "*as a whole*" (2002: 205) and not divided into multiple particularisms. Similarly to Hall's use of the notion of "*Présence*", Gilroy observes that this new conceptions and structures of cultural and political expression have their origin in the created by the triangular trade of sugar, slaves and capital. However, this network has evolved into new structures of cultural exchange in which four angular points of the Transatlantic Trade (and not the traditional three) —namely Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and now the United States— play a significant role (2002: 206). In between these communities, geographically

located at these four distant poles, evolved what Gilroy interprets as “new patterns of metacommunication” (2002: 294), a kind of intercultural and transnational cultural, literary and musical exchanges.

Another aspect of his theory is that these multiple cultural interrelations, which arose out of the heritage of African diaspora, “have been created inside and in opposition to the capitalist system of racial exploitation and domination” (Gilroy 2002: 210). This evolution took place over a long period of time and in spite of conditions of fathomless oppression. Therefore the cultural practices of black communities are closely linked to resistance, political interaction and, most of all, as a reworking of traditions which are exemplified in the syncretic cultures of black Britain. Gilroy argues hence that these negotiations, restoring what has been erased formerly by the savage practices of slavery, gave these various communities substance, validating black culture and reinforcing the sense of being and belonging to a collective identity (2002: 297). *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* ends, in the light of the riotous protests of the eighties in Britain, with a reflection on the symbolic dimensions of these communities and the role of solidarity in the conformation of that collective identity. Gilroy also points at the existence of a moral dimension of the notion of community. This special sense of community is mainly due to the “mutuality, co-operation, identification and symbiosis” (2002: 320) which are central to the process of resistance to and transformation of racial subordination. That is, the historical memory of progress from slave to citizen marked by their values and norms of everyday life produces their own sense of community (2005: 320-339).

As I shall show, Gilroy's early ideas on black communities and resistance are a palpable subtext of *Blonde Roots*. This is particularly so in relation to his idea of black

communities as connected by historical and interpretive boundaries rather than by racial or ethnical essentialisms, which is a recurrent element in Evaristo's narrative. This point is also a central issue in Gilroy's subsequent book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) which focuses on the transnational connections between Africa, the Caribbean, America and Britain resorting to various examples of black musical, literary and philosophical expression. In developing the concept of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy intends to go beyond both the nationalist claims on absolute rootedness and the black cultural productions which sometimes linger on essentialist self-representations. Gilroy argues that black culture may be shaped instead by the African "roots" and, simultaneously, by the transatlantic "routes" of their multiple communities (1993: 19). In this sense, the Black Atlantic has to be understood as a site of black cultural production that makes impossible considerations on ethnic or racial purity.

Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic also "refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics" (1993: 38) suggesting the existence of a counterculture of modernity. In the chapter "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity", Gilroy explains that the Black Atlantic implies not only geographical circuits of resources and ideas. Through the common experience of black diaspora of the former triangular slave trade, this network of ideas and cultural systems became as well an historical site. In order to underline his argument, Gilroy uses the image of a ship as a chronotope that fuses space and time to represent precisely the multiple transatlantic crossings carrying first slaves and later speech, songs and ideas through the Middle Passage. Likewise, this interconnectedness opens also the possibility for contestation, agency and solidarity (1993: 36-37). Gilroy suggests that the distinctive historical experiences of the Black Atlantic's peoples have created a

unique body of reflections on modernity which is still present in their descendants' cultural and political struggles (1993: 45). Furthermore, Gilroy argues that the black Atlantic has produced a "politics of transfiguration" that constructs both an imaginary past and a "postmodern yet-to-come" (1993: 37). This politics of transfiguration is clearly present in the vernacular cultures of the black Atlantic diaspora creating their own body of reflections on modernity and its discontents. It draws upon "the mimetic, dramatic, and performative" (1993: 38) enhancing strategies which are still present in their descendants' cultural and political struggles (1993: 45).

Additionally, Gilroy develops the idea that "racial slavery was integral to western civilisation [...] and is foundational to both black critiques and affirmations of modernity" (1993: x). Besides, Gilroy observes that the history of slavery seems to be exclusively assigned to blacks as he affirms "it becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole" (1993: 49). This is one of the main arguments developed in *Blonde Roots*, as we shall see. Likewise, modernity is revealed to be actively associated with the forms of terror legitimised by the ideas of scientific racism (1993: 55). Gilroy argues thus that whereas modernity maintained the idea that a good life for the individual and the best social and political order for the collectivity were to be achieved through rationality, this same rational modernity was complicit with plantation slavery, colonial regimes and practice of racial terror.

Furthermore, questions of race and representation have neither been included systematically in orthodox canons of Western aesthetics and cultural value (1993: 9) nor seem to have been of relevance in Western centred historiography or debates on Western modernity. While postmodernism has put into question the universalist claims

of the “Enlightenment project” —centred principally on the relationship between freedom and reason— other possible bases for ethics and aesthetics as, for instance, the complex intermixture of African and European philosophical and systems and ideas, remain unacknowledged (1993: 41-45). But, in analysing closely the lives of the plantation inhabitants, it becomes clear that plantation slavery was more than just a system of labour and a distinct mode of racial domination. As Gilroy affirms it provided the foundations for a distinctive network of economic, social, and political relations (1993: 55). He suggests further that from the slave’s restricted space “art became the backbone of the slaves’ political cultures and of their cultural history” (1993: 57). Additionally, it is important to note that these artistic practices of the slaves and their descendants are also grounded outside modernity in their African roots and are articulated in a memory of a pre-slave history. In this way, enlightened ideas as that of history as progress, the fixity of meaning, the idea of universality and ethnocentrism as well as the coherence of the subject are put into question by the slaves own “imaginary past-ness” and their “utopian hopes” (1993: 57).

What is more, the relationship between masters and slaves within the system of plantation slavery actually supplies the key to comprehend the positions of blacks in the modern world. Evolving inside modernity as a counterculture, the concept of black diaspora is linked with the desire to recuperate and narrate this troublesome past. Gilroy observes that this has to be understood as a means of mediating the terror that was inherent to rational and scientific European thought and which portrayed the African slave as stereotypically cultureless, ahistorical and too often bestial. Although it is impossible to return to an single African tradition and a pure past, black diaspora and the cultural networks of the Black Atlantic open up the possibility to return,

comprehend and restage the times of slavery through their own creative writing (1993: 119-221).

Gilroy relates both the capacity to imagine new narratives of the past and to recreate new communities out of the slave experience with distinctively modern cultural experiences. He uses Toni Morrison's imaginative appropriation of history as an example; in fact, in an interview with Gilroy, Morrison explains that black slaves, particularly women, already dealt in the nineteenth century and even earlier with post-modern problems such as the loss of a stable identity; they had to develop strategies for survival and to reconstruct stability which made them truly modern persons. What is more, Morrison observes that the slave experience dehumanized the masters and the apparatus of knowledge which justified and made true their system of slave subjection (Gilroy 1993: 221). *Blonde Roots* also forms part of a narrative of imaginative memory that provides lessons which are not exclusively assigned to blacks (Gilroy 1993: 223).

In order to complete my survey of the different approaches to the concept of diaspora and its relation to black politics of representation from the British perspective, I would also like to draw attention to Avtar Brah who has critically reflected on the concept of diaspora in her *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996). Interestingly, Brah considers the politics of location from a feminist perspective in order to map and comprehend the complicate network of interconnections that exist between the notions of race, ethnicity, class, nation and gender, categories that repeatedly emerge and interact throughout the novel. In fact, Brah considers these concepts explicitly as "gendered phenomena" and inscribes them in what she names "diaspora space" (1996: 15). Her notion of diaspora has to be understood as something distinct from the trajectory of specific diasporas such as African, Jewish or Asian; instead it is related to

the “late twentieth-century transnational movements of people, capital, commodities, technologies, information and cultural forms” (1996: 241). In this sense, she coincides with Gilroy in suggesting that diaspora is “simultaneously about roots and routes” (1996: 192). From Brah’s point of view, “diaspora space” is therefore a conceptual category not only formed by migrated population and their descendants but also by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous (1996: 181). Questioning any ethnocentrism, Brah argues that “whereas in the colonies the ‘colonial Native’ was inferiorised, in Britain the ‘metropolitan Native’ is constructed as superior” (1996: 191).

In line with Hall and Gilroy, Brah also understands ethnicity as a “mode of narrativising the everyday life world in and through processes of boundary formation” (1996: 241). She explains that these processes of inclusion or exclusion from a dominant society, in the British case, from “Britishness” or “Englishness”, are negotiated within the “diaspora space”. In order to identify and differentiate these spaces, it is necessary to examine “how and in what ways is a group inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality, or other axes of differentiation” (1996: 182). Each of these aforementioned axes signifies a specific modality of power relation. In other words, even if all diasporas are implicated in the construction of a common “we”, their internal axes of differentiation create particular relations of power that confront and contest already constituted constructions and stereotypes (1996: 245). She argues therefore for a project in which the “uni” is transfigured through the “multi” so as to enable the constitution of new political subjects and new collective politics (Brah 1996: 248). Consequently, Brah claims that, within these diaspora spaces, a “specific mode of representation is a construction which can be politically challenged and contested” (1996: 245).

In this regard and as the textual analysis will show, *Blonde Roots* gives multiple examples of this intersection of axes of differentiation creating its own particular upside down cartography of power relations. Likewise, in line with Hall and Gilroy, Evaristo clearly contradicts the essentialist ideas of identity from either race. Her reversed slave narrative envisions a new perspective on the inherent and perpetuated essentialism of both sides of the colour binary. Moreover, in recalling the journeys undertaken, literally and symbolically, by the slaves and their descendants, she re-tells their politics, memory and desires. Doris's account exemplifies that identity is not fixed but thoroughly constructed through processes determined by multiple relations of power which by no means are only connected to those of the slave owners. In fact, *Blonde Roots* narrates stories of belonging and unbelonging without ruling out the possibility of resistance. Rather than depicting victims, her slave protagonists are active agents in the processes of creating their own counterculture. However, in *Blonde Roots*, this counterculture is mainly sustained by female slaves. In this regard, Evaristo's reconsidering of relations of power also involves a patriarchal critique that is not only expressed by stressing the importance of female slaves but also by assessing and evaluating the male's role in these power relations. At the same time, Evaristo deploys rhetorical and stylistic devices which are not exclusively explained by Bhabha's notions of mimicry and hybridity. These two additional dimensions actually converge in the idea of transposition which will be the subject of the next paragraphs.

As mentioned before, Gilroy resorts to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope to explain his theory of the transatlantic boundaries of the Black community which actually transcend the purist or essentialist conception of modern nation states. The concept of "chronotope", widely used in literary theory, and which literally means time-

space, has to be seen —according to Bakhtin original use— as “a unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented” in them (2011: 425). Bakhtin stresses thus the connection of temporal and spatial variables, as space is linked to the axes of time, plot and history (2011: 84). In the Black Atlantic, Gilroy uses the image of ships crossing and interconnecting the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean to indicate the spatial and temporal circulation of ideas and the movement of cultural and political facts (1993: 4). Although Evaristo displays similar symbolic images in *Blonde Roots*, she also enhances these chronotopes transposing diachronic histories —for example, the escape of a female slave— within synchronic spaces, like the coexistence and fusion of contemporary British cultural features within an African environment.

I have already argued that McLeod has recently observed that this consequent display of transpositional sensibility can be also found in Evaristo’s previous works (2011: 172). Nevertheless, in *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo not only fuses and transposes historical spaces and times in a postcolonial mode. Her transpositional sensibility adopts characteristics which are also to be related to Braidotti’s more critically feminist understanding of transposition. This concept has to be framed within Braidotti’s theory of nomadic subjects (1994) in which transpositions are expressions of nomadic thought. These are dynamic and self-organizing structures that approach multiple others. Each relation is consequently defined by affirmation and mutual specification and not, as many master narratives propose, by the dialectics of recognition and lack (2011: 2-3).

Braidotti’s notion of transposition is taken, on the one hand, from music, where transposition indicates “variations and shifts of scale in a discontinuous but harmonious pattern” (2008: 5). In this sense, the term is used to refer to virtual spaces that are both

nonlinear and chaotic but also highly productive. On the other hand, the term derives from the field of genetics, where it refers to processes of mutation or the nonlinear transferral of genetic information that is neither random nor arbitrary (Braidotti 2011: 226). Contrarily to the mainstream scientific vision that the gene is a steady entity transmitting fixed units of heredity, these transposable moves denote leaps and bounds ruled by chance but which are by no means deprived of logic and coherence (Braidotti 2011: 226). Braidotti observes that in both cases transposition indicates a cross-boundary or transversal transfer of codes, not only in the quantitative sense but in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities (2008: 5). Therefore, as a concept applied to her nomadic theory (2011), she understands transposition as both a methodological approach and a creative force that challenges dualistic splits through a variety of possible political strategies and the non-dogmatic acceptance of potentially contradictory positions (2008: 1-10). I will show that this notion is especially relevant regarding *Blonde Roots*' various interpretations of alterity. Although Evaristo represents complex social interactions which include apparently contradictory leaps and bounds, her figurations are not deprived from their own logic as they relocate difference within a variety of strategies of resistance and political contestation.

Braidotti's nomadic thought aims to rethink the structures and boundaries of the self by stressing the dynamic and self-organizing structure of thought processes. Her nomadic thought, which is related to vitalist materialism, considers that perceptions, concepts, and imaginings cannot be reduced to human, rational consciousness. Contrarily to most assumptions of classical philosophy, it transforms thinking into an affirmative activity trying to approach multiple others. Similarly to Gilroy's theories, Braidotti's nomadic thinking questions the classical humanism that pivots on a

“centralized, white, male, heterosexual, Eurocentric, capital-owning, standardized vision of the subject” (2008: 33). But by aiming the relocation of difference and the self-other relation, nomadic thought counteracts this dominant discourse (2011: 1-8). Within this framework, the notion of transposition becomes a critique of conventional representational regimes stressing the experience of creative insight in engendering other, alternative ways of knowing (Braidotti 2008: 6).

Interestingly, Braidotti makes further claims to the existence of a current cultural paradox. While our society witnesses an increasing fascination with changes and multiethnic others, there is also a deep emergent anxiety about this rapidly ongoing social transformations and a rising conservatism as a result of these changes (2011: 13). Moreover, she observes a gap between how we live with the internal contradictions of our global societies and the way we represent our daily engagement with it. Therefore, the question of how to represent these mutations, changes and transformations becomes a challenge for both parties: those who are committed to engender and enjoy changes and those who see them with great anxiety (2011: 15). In line with Brah, this contradiction implies the nomadic subject’s necessity to negotiate different axes of power and to synchronize them with the public representations that are made of the subject’s multiple axes of location, that is, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and physicality (2008: 139). She contends that our historical times see the return of the exacerbation of sexual and ethnic others alongside high-technological celebrations of advanced capitalism (2008: 141-42). Aware of these discrepancies and dislocations, Braidotti calls for a shift in figuration and imaginary (2011: 294) that mirrors contemporary society’s demand to simultaneously inhabit different and even potentially contradictory time zones (2008: 140). Ultimately, she proposes her affirmative project —“‘we’ are in

this together” (2011: 294)— as one possible answer to these new necessities and questions reformulating in a nomadic sense both the subject —“we” —and the object — *this*— of this project.

In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo clearly draws attention towards these journeys of “chrono-topia” (Braidotti 2008: 140) as she creates a world where contradictory time zones are clashed and reimagined in the present. She establishes her own transposing notions as race, history and alterity. In the following chapters, I will show numerous examples of *Blonde Roots*’ subversion of racial representation and their underlying power relations. In line with Braidotti’s feminist critical position, I will also uncover the text’s intricate juxtapositions of images that merge past and present transposing gender specific concerns.



3. YINKA SHONIBARE, *UNTITLED* (1997)

3. Transposing race: the arbitrariness of racial constructions

In order to explain some of the aforementioned issues of representation and transposition and the ways in which Evaristo revises them I would like to start analysing *Blonde Roots*' second book devoted to Chief Kaga Konata Katamba I, Bwana for short, Doris's narrative counterpart and master. Divided into seven chapters, this book tells the story from the oppressor's side of slavery in the style of the typical memoir of the eighteenth and nineteenth century adventurer. Bwana interrupts Doris's narrative line with all the power of a merciless slave trader and tries to prevent her from her pursuit of freedom. The reader is thus wrenched from Doris's personal world, introduced in Book One, into Bwana's thoroughly constructed, often exaggerated and unreliable, *Weltanschauung* mirrored in a kind of counter life in Book Two.

There are two realms of representation and transposition in Bwana's life story. One deals with Bwana's personal autobiographical rags-to-riches account transposed here into a parodic fantasy that stands in contrast to Doris's memories and the account of her final escape. Evaristo's reversed representation of a typical eighteenth century slave trader narrates his first voyage as captain of a slaver to Europa, the so called "Grey Continent". There, at the "Cabbage Coast", he supplies himself with the slaves that constitute the cornerstone of his future wealth and status in Ambossan society. Bwana's self-righteous account suggests that the enslaver's oppressive power not only affects the slaves, but, as suggested by Bhabha, also influences the master's psyche which moves between attraction and disavowal of the other. In fact, Evaristo highlights this ambivalence through an intertextual dialogue with *Heart of Darkness* (1899) through which, she subverts Bwana's authority and power.

The second realm draws attention to the complex power relations and ideology which linger behind the racial, colonial and patriarchal discourses embodied by Bwana. Evaristo mainly achieves this by transposing these discourses. As I shall show in the following pages, one element of this transposition is to make visible the complicity between early capitalism and slavery justified on the basis of racial alterity, which in turn questions the enlightened ideal of universal humanism. Another pivotal element consists in the systematic reversal of stereotypes related to the enslaver's colonial discourse. In juxtaposing and combining apparently contrary images and concepts related to cultural, environmental and temporal notions —that is, chronotopes— Evaristo dismantles the racialized discourse of the other stressing its arbitrariness. Throughout Bwana's account, this reversed autobiographical realm of an eighteenth century slave dealer is constantly intertwined and interconnected with the ideological realm of his colonial discourse. The textual analysis will therefore depart from the figure of Bwana itself and his discourse in order to unfold three main themes: first, the interconnections between slavery and the transatlantic slave trade; secondly, its regime of representation with its stereotyping processes and, thirdly, the slave trader's disturbing ambivalence.

To start with the first realm of transposition we can consider the main character. The figure of Bwana in itself stands for the notion of transposition since he is being simultaneously depicted as a typical Nigerian chief (Annex 7.1) and as a white slave trader who embodies the attitudes of the rational entrepreneur in times of early capitalism and the Middle Passage. Evaristo follows here a parodic pattern that will reappear throughout the entire novel and for which I find a kind of visual counterpart in Shonibare's picture *Untitled* (1997). In this photograph, Shonibare represents himself

with some of the quintessential attributes of an eighteenth century Western philosopher subverting traditional signifiers of Enlightenment. Similarly, Evaristo refers to both African and European signifiers to undermine the racist and patriarchal discourse that lingers behind the transatlantic slave trade.

Accordingly, Evaristo explains that, while researching for the novel, she consulted real British anti-abolitionists tracts of the eighteenth century (Emmanus 2008). In the novel, Bwana is presented as African but “when he speaks I’ve very clearly (and satirically) given him the characteristics of an Eighteenth Century slave trader” (Collins 2008: 1202). Hence, Evaristo parodically voices Bwana’s pathetic knowledge and his strictly personal interpretation of truth in a pamphlet entitled “The Flame” which consists in the justification of slave trade as well as his personal hounding of Doris. The pamphlet focuses “On the true Nature of the Slave Trade & Remarks on the Character & Customs of the Europans” and has a strong autobiographical component as he discusses his “Progression from Inauspicious Origins to the highest Echelons of Civilised Society” (*BR*: 109; Annex 7.2). The juxtaposing and merging of historical and contemporary facts also becomes evident in the title of Bwana’s pro-slavery pamphlet since “The Flame” is the title of the current British National Party’s magazine. Likewise, the enslaver’s short name or title, “Bwana”, is equally satirical and self-reflecting as white slave masters were traditionally called Bwana.⁵ Hence, Evaristo interconnects and synchronizes real and imaginary facts not only to re-examine the past but also to question the present connecting former racist discourses with contemporary racist beliefs and practices.

⁵ Bwana: noun (in East Africa) a boss or master (often used as a title or form of address). Origin Kiswahili (ODE 2003).

When Bwana starts his account addressing his “Dear Reader” and offering his credentials —“I am a reasonable man and a man with reasons” (*BR*: 110)— Evaristo reveals more of these interconnections, as she confronts the reader with a parody of pro-slavery ideas and the well-known values of reason and civilisation associated with the Enlightenment. The author uses mimetic devices which are either visual —the front page of Bwana’s pamphlet “The Flame” (*BR*: 109; Annex 7.2) or its last page in the form of advertisements (*BR*: 153; Annex 7.2)— or generic, as for instance, his constant use of the appellative “Dear Reader”: “Yes, Dear Reader, the natives of those lands are just now emerging from the abominable depths of savagery which we civilized nations left behind in prehistoric times” (*BR*: 118). Following eighteenth century epistolary conventions, Evaristo mimics here the righteous and magnifying tone of what we would identify today as the fantasy of a quintessential “self-made man”, and Bwana, accordingly, calls himself a “self-made entrepreneur” and “captain of industry” (*BR*: 110). Bwana also proceeds to vindicate his duty “to maintain business standards” as well as his “right to property” (*BR*: 110) which, when violated, represents a direct attack against his personal liberty which has consequently to be defended. Evaristo transposes this representative British slave trader into a typical African environment through a suggestive language rich in images and metaphors: “We were served ducks spitting their own juices on platters, yams roasted to a golden brown, fried spinach spiced with chilli pepper and garlic, and plantains roasted whole so that the yellow flesh oozed out of burst, blackened skins” (*BR*: 117). This language is typical for Evaristo’s chronotopes but, in this case, it can also be seen as a parody and reminder of Imperialism’s outrageous lavishness. Finally, Bwana closes his treatise with the aforementioned set of advertisements (*BR*: 153, Annex 7.2), which satirically allude not only to the pillars of trade and capitalism —the banking and insurance system— but

also to the mainstay of power: nation, religion, royalty, as well as the legal and military system.

This procedure of interconnecting disparate worlds also becomes especially evident as Evaristo combines real historical facts, with concrete and detailed references to the transatlantic slave trade and relates them to Bwana's personal evolution. For instance, in the second chapter, "Humble Origins-Personal Tragedy", Bwana describes his youth and his beginnings as a slave trader. He becomes the captain of a slaver — ironically called *Hope & Glory* (BR: 116)— with which he

would carry forty cases of muskets, 32,000 gunflints, coral necklaces, Aphrikan prints, bead jewellery, quills, papyrus, household objects such as kettles and musical instruments such as the talking drum, with which to barter for livestock. My host joked that the guns would encourage the Europeans to start more wars which would result in more prisoners offered up as slaves. Once at our destination -the island of New Ambossa in West Japan- we would exchange the slaves for sugar, rum and tobacco. And once back in GA, these luxury goods would be sold for a small fortune. Furthermore, as a special incentive to remain loyal to my paymaster, I was to receive 10 per cent of the overall profit made for every slave shipment safely arrived in New Ambossa. (BR: 116-117)

These words faithfully portray the workings of the transatlantic slave trade and additionally disclose what has also been called the "'Uncomfortable Truths' of British involvement in the slave trade" (Muñoz 2007: 41). Behind the complete reversal of Africans enslaving Europeans, Evaristo is "re-presenting" through an imaginative reversal the factual history of Europeans enslaving Africans (Collins 2008: 1202). Consequently, and in line with Paul Gilroy's theories in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) discussed in the previous chapter, Bwana's autobiographical report becomes testimony of the intrinsic involvement of slavery and racism in the construction of capitalism, Enlightenment, and, ultimately, Western civilization (Gilroy 1993: x).

In fact, Bwana's apparently enlightened ideals are soon dismantled when he reveals his plain capitalist interests behind the slave trade enterprises: "I calculated that should I add another 150 slaves, making a total of 550, the gross profit would rise to somewhere in the region of C£71.500-10 per cent of which, C£7,150, would be mine" (BR: 144). In this regard, Sabine Broek has noted that "European modernity was intimately connected to –and indeed constituted *within* and to a large extent *by*– a slave trading economy" (2004: 236). She contends that even John Locke's famous rebuttal of slavery in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), considered as pioneer in proposing the concept of "freedom as self-possession" and the rights of appropriate political representation only addresses the "natural rights" of men who are already considered free and, that is, the modern English bourgeois. Africans, as subjects of chattel labour, were not included in the same category as Englishmen, and had, thus, no rights against oppression. In this sense, freedom has to be considered as an object of negotiation always in relation to slavery (Broek 2004: 235-247). In line with the ideas shown in *Blonde Roots*, Broek claims that freedom was never given in a "universal" sense and that the Middle Passage should be therefore considered a "hitherto ignored or displaced point of departure for postmodern instances of self-reflexivity" (2004: 246). Thus, Evaristo's portrayal of Bwana and his enterprises stands symbolically for the self-reflecting examination of the role of slavery in contemporary society while his narrative questions Britain's enlightened role as beacon of the humanitarian idea of freedom.

But Bwana's life story also reveals the second pivotal theme of the intrinsic connection between the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. For Bwana it is extremely important how others see him and to present himself accordingly; through his account it also becomes clear that Bwana's economic enterprises depend to a great extent on the invalidation of the slave, one which ultimately justifies colonization and slavery.

Evaristo starts thus to outline the carefully constructed stereotypes and clichés which sustain the assumptions of racial differences and which are necessary to safeguard the slave trader's position and to ensure his successful economic enterprises. In other words, by emphasizing the mechanism of representation of the other through Bwana's compulsive use of stereotypes, Evaristo implies that power involves the control over those processes of representation. Moreover, as Bwana is positioned as the black master over white "wiggers",⁶ she contends that this power is constructed and arbitrary.

In this sense, racism and prejudices are not merely the personal choice of Bwana as an evil individual, but form part of the exertion of power within a wider discursive system or, in Foucault's words, a "regime of truth". As Foucault explains: "each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements..." (1980: 131). Foucault implies, thus, that power has the capacity to change its own knowledge into truth and, what is more, power has to be considered as a process and not as an object or essence. This involves the management of representations since the exertion of power and subjugation reaches far beyond physical coercion as we have seen in Said's analysis of Foucault's work (2003). The third chapter of Bwana's narrative, entitled "Some are more humans than others" (BR: 118), paraphrases George Orwell's words in *Animal Farm* (1945): "All animals are created equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (2003). In this section, Bwana voices nineteenth century pseudo-scientific theories regarding the classification and definition of race and presents them as irrefutable evidence and undeniable "truth" acquired and verified during a "period of study" (BR: 118) he undertakes:

⁶ In *Blonde Roots*, Evaristo creates new words to convey her reversed world. "Wigger" obviously combines the word "white" with the pejorative "nigger".

The more enlightened among you will already be aware that there are three stages or, if you like, classifications of humanity according to the exact science of Craniofaecia Anthropometry, a tried and tested science which measures skull sizes within the rigorous and most esteemed field of Physical Anthropology. [...] These classifications are: [...] No.1 – The Negroid, who is indigenous to the Aphrikan continent. [...] No.2 – The Mongoloid, who is indigenous to the Asian territories. [...] No.3 – The Caucasoinid, who is indigenous to the hell-hole known as Europe. (BR: 118)

As a result, in agreement with Nietzsche's epigraph —“All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth”— which Evaristo uses to open the novel, her satirical reversal dismantles the arbitrariness of scientific racism and institutionalized knowledge. On the other hand, her inverted world stresses the historical process by which the concept of difference was negatively charged becoming the equivalent of inferiority (Braidotti 2002: 3-4). What is more, Evaristo proceeds to intertwine Bwana's “manifest” racism expressed in blunt opinions —“to put it in simple terms, the Caucasoinid breed is *not of our kind*” (BR: 120)— with an assemblage of simplified and standardized images of the “whytes”, typical of the enslaver's “regime of truth”, exemplifying Said's “latent” process of stereotyping:

The orthognathous jaw itself denotes weakness of character, limited imagination and restricted intellect. The general consensus is that these cranio-structural defects also produce the traits of infantilism, aimlessness, laziness, cowardice, poor coordination, moral degradation, and a nonsensical language or languages; so unintelligible, in fact, that it has not yet been verified by linguistic experts whether Europa possesses one language, classified as Mumble-Jumble, several languages, or merely one language with several dialects. (BR: 119-120)

Bwana's vocabulary illustrates a process of dehumanization that culminates in the commercialization of slaves as described in the fifth chapter of Bwana's account: “The Saving of Souls” (BR: 139). Because they are considered as a degenerate population, Bwana believes that the other actually needs to be civilized through the higher moral and material knowledge of their own civilization: “the Europeane slaves have been saved from the most horrendous deaths, punishments, morally reprehensible

indulgences and serfdom, whilst being given the opportunity to adopt the manners and customs of civilized men” (*BR*: 121). Alternatively, when this is not achieved, violence has to be applied. Bwana repeatedly insists on Doris’s ingratitude by abusing his “generosity” and finally justifies the subjugation of the other through the use of raw force and torture: “It is true that there are limits to the brain capacity of the Caucasoi but it has been proven that some kind of moral foundation can be learned. When that fails, the switch and the rawhide serve useful functions. As do the thumbscrew and the rack” (*BR*: 111).

Evaristo also draws attention to the fact that stereotyping processes do not merely include physical traits. Through Bwana’s description of the “Grey Continent” and its natives, she dismantles other conventional stereotyped assumptions about cultural habits and customs. For instance, Bwana sardonically explains that, contrarily to his custom of wearing a loincloth, the savages are overdressed to the point that “their feet were clad too, in objects called boots [...] Some, though, wore the foot objects called shoes, made of either animal hide or even stranger –wood” (*BR*: 126). Likewise, he mocks that he “was offered a drink called tea which looked like dirty water and tasted like boiled straw” (*BR*: 139). While the funny reversal of these cultural prejudices serves a parodic purpose, Bwana’s ethnological misrepresentations reveal his misjudgment of the other according to Ambossan standards of what constitutes civilization.

Part of Bwana’s observations derives from the fact that he lands in a Europa which is presented as Medieval. Interestingly, Evaristo’s transposition of Doris’s homeland into feudal times avoids any simplification of the native’s world. On the one hand, in drawing a parallelism between Britain’s medieval serfdom and transatlantic

slavery, she conveys that slavery can adopt a variety of forms of which contemporary society is not always aware (Annex 7.1). On the other hand, she also implies that within the slave's society itself there are multiple internal axes of difference and even contradictions that actually facilitate enslavement and colonial submission. One example is the figure of Lord Percival, the feudal lord of Doris's family, for whom the slave trade becomes a source of his own wealth and power. Notwithstanding his privileged position as a native slave trader, he ironically ends up being enslaved by Bwana, a point to which I shall return in chapter four.

These cultural stereotyping processes equally illustrate the third aspect implicit in Bwana's discourse. His experiences in the Cabbage Coast attest to his obsession to mock the native in order to hide his own anxiety and fears. This also responds to his necessity to fix and control those codes of behavior and environment that differ from his own. Especially, the reversed references to the native's religious beliefs, superstitions and their flawed system of laws (*BR*: 136-137) draw attention to the ambivalent representation of the Cabbage Coast's inhabitants as simultaneously exotic and dangerous, as seen for instance in the description of their religious practices:

The lead native wore a vivid purple robe and carried two wooden sticks in front of him, the shorter horizontal one crossing the longer vertical one. [...] Six of the taller males balanced a long wooden box on their shoulders. [...] I nearly jumped out of my skin when they started up a communal chant rendered in a babble of uncouth sounds which went something like this: *ourfatherwhoartinheav...* (*BR*: 132)

In this context, Bwana's "daemonic repetition" (Bhabha 2008: 95) and obsessive reminder of the other's shortcomings are related to Bhabha's reading of colonial stereotype as a fetish (2008: 106). Bwana's stereotypes move between delight and fear as he requires the other to authenticate himself as civilized and superior but, at the same

time, the superiority of the coloniser constantly threatened by the other's multiple racial and cultural differences.

This aspect is also emphasized by his obsession to persuade the reader of his manhood. Evaristo describes Bwana's trauma after failing to fulfill the standards set by his father and being displaced by his younger brother. Every time he stresses the qualities of courage, strength, and sexual potency traditionally associated with men, his father's cynical query resonates in his narrative: "Is my son Kaga more woman than man?" (*BR*: 114). Significantly, in the third book, Evaristo lets Bwana bequeath the same set of beliefs, and even traumas, to his own sons Nonso and Bamwoze (*BR*: 148). Since Evaristo conscientiously portrays Bwana as a quintessential black patriarch (Annex 7.1), this can be understood as a critique of traditional black patriarchy and the inheritance of patriarchal role models. However, the author lets Bwana emancipate himself from his "inauspicious" and traumatic origins going to sea "aboard a schooner" to climb the "robe ladder of life" (*BR*: 114), just like so many second sons of the English bourgeois middle class families did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fusing both black and white patriarchal worlds, Evaristo aims to reveal universal strategies of male domination and possibly to answer how male power is enacted and maintained in our contemporary society (hooks 2004: xiii).

Furthermore, Evaristo intertwines pornographic fantasies into Bwana's account to highlight his need to assert dominance through his sexuality: "That evening I sank my knees and swirled my hips with Chief Ambikaka's sleekly oiled wenches who had bounteous breasts and bullet-catching buttocks –while the hi-life music vibrated into the skies above the compound" (*BR*: 117). His sexual obsession and misogynist remarks not only reflect the need of a patriarchal society to control the female body. When he

explains his encounter with the racial other at the Cabbage Coast, it becomes evident that the colonial subjugation of “whites” is expressed through the sexual control and dominance of the racialized female body. Once again, this sexual harassment moves between the opposing poles of attraction and disavowal. This becomes especially evident at the end of Bwana’s story, in particular in the chapter “Sailing the Seas of Success”. On the slaver, proceeding to the West Japanese Islands, he is expected by his Ambossan crew to subjugate sexually the female slaves: “I was forced to give in to pressure from my Chief Mate who said it was ‘mighty unnatural, sir’ (implying *what*, exactly?) for a captain to decline first pickings” (*BR*: 146). It is for the sake of his “manly reputation” (*BR*: 146) that he rapes, renames and subjugates Doris’s sister Sharon, who eventually becomes his mistress. In this regard, Evaristo not only interweaves Doris’s and Bwana’s fate at a very personal level —linking them both to Sharon— but also concurs with Robert Young’s observations that there is a connection between racial theories of white superiority and the justification of expansion and domination. Young considers sexuality as a third mediating term between culture and racism and points out that the links between sex and race derive from cultural stereotypes which evoke an ambivalent and contradictory relation between blackness and attractiveness, dangerous sexuality and fertility (2006: 90-98). Young further claims that the nineteenth century racial theories of white superiority also gave way to ideas of civilizing and whitening the other through interbreeding (2006: 142-59). Bwana would be an example of these politics as he explains:

Pray, do not be shocked. Yes, they are half-breeds, but they are my half-breeds. The first child she bore me, Kolladao, is now a successful overseer. [...] It may surprise you to learn that long after my first voyage Iffianachukwana still remains my only plantation whore. [...] One has grown somewhat used to her. (*BR*: 149)

Bwana's words and his relationship with Sharon —renamed as Iffianachukwana— show his simultaneous repulse and attraction of the Other. Evaristo's complex game of reversed representations reveals the inherent contradictions of colonial discourse. Additionally, Bwana's use of language in general highlights this disturbing shift between attraction and repulsion. He renders uncanny and unhomely depictions of nature and climate in the unknown territories he visits, gradually unveiling his own pathological fears:

Brooding clouds had amassed in the skies with a deathly quiet, making the shore overcast and ominous, and as I surveyed the forlorn beach it sunk home that we had arrived on terra firma most sinister. [...] Indeed, it will be readily understood that I felt most imperiled. (BR: 123)

Moreover, Bwana's fear becomes psychotic since he feels threatened by innocuous natives who “brandished a farcical yet nonetheless disturbing assortment of weapons: saucepans, wooden spoons, hammers” when he first arrives to the Cabbage Coast (BR: 124). Although Bwana decides to annihilate the menacing other —“*make sure you don't miss*” (BR: 127)— he also physically embodies disavowal and self-awareness thus proving the contradictory nature of his own discourse:

The soundless air was chilly as the heart of a poisoner. The sea sucked up the shore with a viper's hiss. The trees were malevolent assassins spying on us. Before us lay the bloody carnage of warfare. As I surveyed the gut – wrenching vision, a terrible swelling rose in my stomach. I struggled to subdue it, but, alas, I could not. Captain Katamba, leader of Men, rushed into the sea, and well, yes, he threw up. (BR: 127)

Thus, Evaristo bestows Bwana with those psychic and social problems, as first described by Frantz Fanon and later by Bhabha, which traditionally accompany the representation of the colonized subject and which, in this case, question Bwana's absolute power. Moreover, Evaristo also subverts his authority by ridiculing his excuses for murdering whyte people: “it was not I who was a murderer, after all. I, who was

possessed of the most benevolent of intentions, had never personally killed a man...I had not fired a single shot —my men, or rather the crew, had” (BR: 128). Evaristo further stresses this point by establishing a contrast between Doris’s painful and detailed description of the slave’s sufferings in the Middle Passage seen in “Book One” with Bwana’s deliberately short references to this journey: “There is little reason to trouble you with the minutiae of the long and tiresome journey to New Ambossa” (BR: 146). Bwana’s outright disavowal once more exemplifies the master’s fundamental ambivalence and draws attention to Bhabha’s argument that both dominant and dominated subjects are strategically placed in their discursive system in a given historical moment (2004: 94-120).

Finally, this simultaneous conveyance of ambiguity and subversion of colonial authority is also reflected in Evaristo’s intertextual references to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Bwana’s first disastrous encounter with the natives can actually be mirrored in Marlow’s first visit to Kurtz’s station, where Conrad describes a similar carnage but, contrarily to Bwana, displays no sign of remorse on Marlow’s side. Although the title of the chapter “Heart of Greyness” (BR: 129-137) subverts the colonial black-white binary, Evaristo chooses to transpose Conrad’s naturalistic depiction of the Congo’s exotic but menacing nature into Bwana’s equally unhomely portrayal of the European shores:

Alien creepers threatened to block our path, the contorted arms of grotesque trees threatened to reach out and strangle me, the ground was matted with diseased leaves, the damp climate chilled my bones. Shrill sounds shot out into the silence. Something hawked up in the trees. From inside the undergrowth came sounds which were neither human nor animal. Demons brushed their icy lips past mine. I felt *watched*. (BR: 130-131)⁷

⁷These lines remind us of a passage from Conrad: “The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence” (2007: 36).

Evaristo not only contests Conrad's imperialist ideas, but also questions the almighty colonial gaze upon the 'Other', revealing the master's grotesque shortcomings. As I shall show in subsequent chapters, the novel similarly reverses Fanon's interpellation —“Look, a Negro!”— bestowing the slave with an empowering female gaze.

If Conrad's ghostly characterization of Kurtz and Marlow's loyal admiration for him contributed to the failure of the indictment of imperialism (Sacido Romero 2011: 43-60), Evaristo introduces, instead, a very tangible middleman, Byakatonda. Functioning as a reversed example of Kurtz's process of “going native”, this character lives in the heart of the “Grey Continent” and, contrarily to the admiration Marlow feels for Kurtz, Byakatonda inspires Bwana very little respect:

As we penetrated deeper into the dark heart of Europa my host began to prove cordial enough, prattling on about an impoverished upbringing on a maize farm in the outback of Great Ambossa. (As if *I* should admire *him*.) [...] He showed no interest in the country he had left behind. [...] The jungle had claimed him. [...] The jungle was his home now. (*BR*: 131)

In this sense, Evaristo parodies the colonial anxiety and trepidation felt by those individuals who may become assimilated into the culture and customs of the indigenous peoples. She questions the role of Byakatonda by dismantling his colonial hypocrisy: “It was all quite hilarious [...] My host revealed that when he eventually returned to GA to live a life of luxury, he planned to form the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Beliefs and Customs” (*BR*: 138).⁸ Moreover, carrying her parodic subversion to

⁸ In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is entrusted by the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” to make a report for its future guidance (Conrad 2007: 61).

the limits, Evaristo concludes the narration of Bwana and Byakatonda's encounter quite differently from Conrad: "It was time to bid farewell to Byakatonda. An odd, unlikeable, fellow with which one could, nonetheless, do business" (BR: 145).

Evaristo's contestation of Conrad's canonical text becomes even more evident as she merges Bwana's malaise into the double play of re-presentation and reversal. After witnessing a witch burning, Bwana quotes Kurtz's famous phrase: "What can I say, Dear Reader, but the horror, the *horror*..." (BR: 136). Evaristo's re-reading highlights thus Chinua Achebe's classical interpretation of Conrad's text. Achebe notes that Conrad's novel mirrors the deep anxieties about the precariousness of Western civilization and the constant need for reassurance by comparison (1988: 260-62). Hence, "Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray -- a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate" (1988: 261). Even though Bwana's narrative fulfils this function, he does not escape "erect and immaculate" in Evaristo's novel. Throughout his entire narration, Bwana's moralizing argumentation and his exaggerated display of power is rendered ambiguous and flawed. He actually becomes an unreliable narrator who dismantles his own power, contradicting his previous accounts as he moves forward in his autobiographical narrative and showing his weakness as a master. While he seeks the reader's sympathy by emphasizing his qualities as economic and political leader, he continuously tries to justify and exculpate some of his actions vindicating his masculinity and refusing "those who are betwixt and between" (BR: 111). This reveals that Bwana's narrative is constructed to manipulate and justify the enslaving atrocities he commits but is also trapped in his own power system, revealing its inconsistencies and contradictions.

Significantly, in the chapter “The Saving of Souls”, Evaristo briefly gives voice to some of the slaves Bwana purchases: ““We are good folk, simple folk, poor folk. I beg you, get us out of here. We only want to go home and live in peace”” (*BR*: 141). Dismantling Bwana’s lack of morals once again, these slaves emerge as human individuals with sentiments overwhelmed and stunned by the enslaver’s atrocities. Additionally, by disclosing some of the slaves as Doris’s father and her family, Evaristo not only reveals relevant information about the fate of Doris’s family, but bestows them also with a humanity that is missing in Conrad’s representation of the Congo natives. Through their personal fates and inner contradictions, the enslaved population is not misrepresented as victims without agency. As I shall show in the following chapter, Doris’s awareness of the mechanisms of oppression and her consequent acts will become a key theme of the novel.

All in all, the systematic deconstruction and transposition of Bwana’s colonial discourse becomes highly counter-discursive as Evaristo’s representation stresses a clear inversion of traditional stereotypes of black people. That is, stereotyping is represented in a process of reversal that is constructed through arbitrary functions of power, which this time are exerted by Ambossan blacks over white Europeans. Additionally, the slave trader’s position of power is never absolute and becomes blurred in Bwana’s autobiographical account. By portraying Bwana’s insistent self-praise, his uncanny fears as well as his unreliability, the author equally transposes the colonial discourse. By conferring an aura of primitivism, degeneration, and backwardness on the white people instead of the black or oriental, she revises more conservative signifying practices ultimately transposing racial notions. Evaristo suggests that the control over the mechanism of otherness is no longer exclusively endowed to the colonisers but can

be reversed and questioned by the colonised. As a result, and in line with Shonibare's provocative gaze of his self-portrait, Evaristo's subversive reversal allows the reader to look at racism from the outside of either race adopting a distanced position that puts in doubt any supposedly pure origin.



4. YINKA SHONIBARE, *WANDERER* (2006)

4. Transposing Space and Time

In the previous chapter, I have focused on Evaristo's parodic portrayal of the slave trading system and its discourse as represented by Bwana. In this section, my objective is to concentrate on Evaristo's representation of the slave's world through the novel's protagonist Doris. This representation can be certainly regarded as a chronotope in itself as Doris immerses in Book One into what could be considered a simultaneous journey through space and time. This becomes especially evident as she guides the reader into the reimagined worlds of Londolo, the capital of the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, and, through a series of flashbacks, into the English feudal system of her beloved home in the "Cabbage Coast". Her geographical flight through Londolo is thus experienced physically within synchronic diasporic spaces, whereas her mental journey back to her much yearned homeland recreates the diachronic memories of her childhood. These memories, especially those of Doris's abduction and subsequent enslavement, also become the catalyst for representing the Middle Passage in what is a faithful historical account. The atrocities of the journey to the New World are combined with flashbacks that narrate, with a highly emotional and fairytale tone, Doris's happiest childhood memories. In this regard, by transposing contemporary references into an otherwise historically accurate portrayal of the slaves' sufferings, Evaristo reminds the reader of the connections between historical and contemporary racialized representations. Likewise, Evaristo transposes imaginary memories and homelands into diasporic timelines and spaces "in order to rescue what we need of the past in order to trace paths of transformation of our lives here and now" (Braidotti 1994: 6).

Blonde Roots opens with the narration of her frustrated first attempt to flee slavery in the style of traditional slave narratives. After leaving her somewhat privileged position as Bwana's house slave and personal secretary with the help of the "Resistance" —an organization working to advance the liberation of slaves— Doris hurries across Londolo's bustling city centre attempting to catch the former railroad system now transformed into the so called "Underground Railroad". Although this is obviously a reference to the system used by slaves in North America, Evaristo transposes it as part of London's disused underground. Her journey takes her further to Londolo's docks from which she is supposed to catch a ship to Europa. There, Doris manages to embark on a slaver which is to take her home, though this return never happens as she is captured by Bwana and sent to the New World. Interestingly, during her flight, Doris receives directly or indirectly the help of different Ambossan members of the Resistance. These encounters at the diverse sites of her diasporic wanderings allow her to consider her experiences with other slaves or enslavers and, at the same time, to critically reflect upon the Ambossan racialized regime of representation. In this regard, Evaristo bestows Doris with both the itinerant act of travelling of the diasporic subject and Braidotti's "critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour" (1994: 5) of nomadic subjects.

Shonibare's "Wanderer" (2006) could be used to illustrate the complex relationship between diaspora and critical consciousness. His replica represents the schooner "Wanderer" that was converted into a slave ship as late as 1857.⁹ Shonibare observes that the notion of wandering implies a kind of freedom and self-determination emblematic of the African diaspora (Poovaya-Smith 2007). The wax cotton sails of the

⁹On 25 March 1807 Parliament passed an Act that put an end to the legal transportation of Africans across the Atlantic. The institution of slavery was not abolished until 1834 (Muñoz 2007: 41).

replica not only stand symbolically for this African diaspora but also challenge the traditional white or European control over racial representations, as the fabric of the sails and the vitrine correlate to both African and Western culture (Poovaya-Smith 2007). The “Wanderer” represents thus very different kinds of power relations reminding us, on the one hand, of the interconnection between Western civilization and the transatlantic slave trade, and, on the other, of the slaves’ ignored powers (Poovaya-Smith 2007). As suggested by *Blonde Roots*’ dedication, Doris likewise stands for the multiple wanderings of African slaves representing the “10 to 12 million Africans taken to Europe and the Americas as slaves ... and their descendants” (*BR*: v). However, because she has been reinvented as a white slave, Doris also questions and subverts conventional regimes of representation. In this regard, Evaristo concurs with Shonibare in emphasising the protagonist’s awareness of her capacity to contest the othering mechanism and power relations from within in order to transform “our lives here and now” (Braidotti 1994: 6). On the whole, it could be argued that Evaristo’s reinterpretation of the traditional slave narrative aims at interconnecting true historical facts with the imagined emotional worlds of former slave communities linking them to current social and feminist concerns.

In the following pages, I provide an exhaustive analysis of Doris’s account. My analysis will be structured into two sections. The first section considers her physical journey through Londolo’s diasporic sites, the second examines Doris’s imagined journey through her childhood memories. Both journeys illustrate Doris’s reaction to the mechanisms of othering and the nature of slavery in relation to Evaristo’s main chronotopes and transpositions. The novel thus undermines concepts related to racial representations and stereotyping processes but also subverts fixed notions of

“homeland” and “historical past”. They also draw into sharp focus her resistance and contestation of Ambossan’s power politics and its regime of representation through the oppositional gaze.

4. 1. Re-presenting diasporic sites and cultural practices: “Londolo”

Despite Evaristo’s evident use of the traditional slave narrative genre, the reader is not confronted with a victim’s voice. On the contrary, as the novel’s opening directly suggests, this time racial mechanisms of othering won’t work as usual. The very first lines of the novel read as follows:

So while my boss Bwana and his family are out clinking rum-and-coke glasses and shaking their wobbly backsides at fancy parties down the road, I’ve been assigned duties in his office to sort through his ledgers. I used to hope that the celebration of Voodoomass would be the one day off in the year for us slaves – but oh no, it’s business as usual. (*BR*: 3)

These few lines introduce what will become programmatic in Evaristo’s subsequent use of chronotopes to transpose gender specific concerns. The author opens the novel with an imagined location which is “both African and European *simultaneously*” (McLeod 2011: 172). As McLeod observes, this simultaneity situates African cultural features and settings within a recognisable European historical and physical terrain, making the reader aware of the historical connections between European imperialism and African ecology (2011: 179-180). But, as these lines from the novel also show, the author ironically resorts to an informal language that relocates Doris’s parallel universe into our times. Doris’s poignant and ironic female voice displays a resistance to the dominant discourse from the beginning of the novel. Likewise, Evaristo’s satirical references to the “rum-and-coke glasses” and the “Voodoomass” can be read through Braidotti’s notion of transposition, as they suggest a

mode of representation that, as previously mentioned, offers a linkage between the opposed “discursive communities” (2008: 7).

Through Doris’s journey, the reader is confronted with Britain’s racist legacy of slavery as Londolo strongly reminds us of contemporary London. Following the above-stated pattern, Evaristo uses intertextual references, adaptations and wordplays alluding to well-known settings and cultural aspects of the city. Doris flees from “Mayfah”: “the heart of the most expensive piece of real estate in the known world” (*BR*: 4), heading towards “Edgwa District” (*BR*: 23), to catch the Underground train from “Paddinto Station” (*BR*: 6). In her parallel universe, other parts of Londolo are called “Brixtane” or “To Ten Ha Ma” (*BR*: 30), and she adapts the names of the tube lines to African sounding names: “Bakalo Line – Southbound via Baka Street, Marbone, Ox Fordah Crossroads, Embankere, Wata Lo, Londolo Bridge, Kanada Wadi” (*BR*: 43). Doris’s portrayal of the docks at Kanada Wadi evokes the areas of Canada and Canary Wharves. Formerly belonging to the busiest port in the world, these two wharves are nowadays major financial and business centres, accommodating the headquarters of leading British and European Banks. This is where Evaristo uncannily locates the big slavers which “exchanged slaves for rum, tobacco, cotton, and then sailed back home to the UK —rich, obese, slothful, satisfied” (*BR*: 72). Through these imaginative devices Evaristo fuses space and time, linking London’s past as a slaving harbour with its consequent economic and imperial expansion, which finally contributed to the city’s current economic and financial hegemony as well as to its status as a multicultural urban centre.

As Doris proceeds with her journey towards the underground, the reader learns that the city is also divided into suburbs and ghettos which are called, depending on the

colour, wealth and the degree of freedom of their inhabitants, “Vanilla Suburbs” or “Chocolate Cities” (BR: 29-31). In fact, Chocolate Cities and their Vanilla suburbs are a contemporary phenomenon in the suburbanization processes of U.S. cities. Although the free slaves who inhabit these areas are subject to the feared “SUS Laws”,¹⁰ these “Burbs” are presented in the novel as popular touristic sites for Aphrikan holidaymakers who would “gawk at the ghetto natives with anthropological fascination” (BR: 31), thus echoing the marketing that certain ethnic areas in contemporary London have been subjected to. The contemporaneity of Evaristo’s chronotopias is equally seen in the description of these Burbs as syncretised spaces in which free slaves can obtain European food (BR: 30), or get a flattening nose operation that would allow whyte women to approach the Ambossan beauty canon (BR: 30). In this regard, Evaristo’s “Burbs” are expression of the confluence of multiple diasporic populations as pointed at by Brah (1996) in relation to multicultural London sites.

The multilayered functions of these syncretised spaces and chronotopias become even more evident in Doris’s description of the long forgotten Ambossan tube trains. Down there she discovers posters and advertisements that announce old theatre plays or shows: “*Guess Who’s Not Coming To Dinner, To Sir with Hate, Little Whyte Sambo Esq., [...], The Tragic Octoroon, [...], The Whyte and Blak Minstrel Show*” (BR: 42). Evaristo’s intertextual game confers a syncretic and transpositional atmosphere to Doris’s account, as all these titles refer to real nineteenth and twentieth century black

¹⁰“Sus. British informal. Relating to or denoting a law under which a person could be arrested on suspicion of having committed an offence” (OED 2008). During the 1980s, the SUS-law was the subject of political discussion particularly among black and ethnic minorities due to the race riots that occurred in Britain at the time. Interestingly in 2008, —when *Blonde Roots* was published, the British Conservative Party reinitiated the discussion about the implantation of these laws.

iconography that contributed to the shaping of racist caricatures.¹¹ All these chronotopes equally reveal that certain stereotypes and prejudices are repeatedly enacted, consequently fixed, and thus ‘naturalised’ in the dominant discourse. They serve to conceal and undermine any diversity or individuality of the other and are revealed as fundamental in their function of maintaining a certain structure of power. Especially significant is Evaristo’s reference to the minstrel shows,¹² a tradition present in British television as late as 1978.¹³ These representations played a significant role in cementing and proliferating racist images, attitudes and perceptions. They are therefore exemplary of the persistence of a basic racial “grammar of representation” (Hall 2011: 251). Evaristo reverses these images by describing the minstrel actors as whyte and wearing: “clogs on their feet, bells on their ankles, [...] and rubbed their bottoms up against each other. All the while singing music hall songs about being lazy, lying, conniving, cowardly, ignorant, sexually repressed buffoons” (*BR*: 43). In this regard, Evaristo is aware of the fact that —as put by bell hooks— “the issue of race and representation is not just a questioning of critiquing the status quo [but] about transforming the image, creating alternatives” that move away from “dualistic thinking about good and bad” (1992: 4).

¹¹ Evaristo’s refers to the popular films *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *To Sir with Love* (1967) in which black actor Sidney Portier takes the leading role. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), and the tragic octoroon or tragic mulatto are nineteenth century stereotypical fictional characters. The tragic octoroon is a mainly a female figure of a mixed-race person who fails to completely fit in the white or black world and almost always meets a bad end. Lydia Maria Child’s short story “The Quadroons” (1942) is considered to initiate the tradition of this tragic character in abolitionist literature.

¹² “A popular stage entertainment featuring songs, dances, and comic dialogue in highly conventionalized patterns, usually performed by white actors in blackface. It developed in the US in early and mid 19th century” (OED 2008).

¹³ *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was a runaway success on TV and achieved an audience of 16.5 million in 1964 (Kavanagh).

By the same token, Doris reflects on Bwana's household, his family and other slaves with whom she shares her life, showing her painful awareness of the enslaver's power politics and the racist legacy of slavery. Examples of such oppressive politics include, for instance, remarks about the monogamous family structure of the whytes — ridiculed by the polygamous Ambossans as “uneconomical, selfish, typically hypocritical and just plain backwards” (*BR*: 19)— but also references to the imposed Ambossan dressing code and beauty standards. Doris is actually forced to adopt these by Bwana's first wife, ironically called Madama Blessing, who expects Doris to: “look respectable when I opened the door to her distinguished guests and not like some uncouth wretch from Europa” (*BR*: 19). Moreover, Evaristo inverts and satirises our own arbitrary notions of beauty: “A prominent clavicle, corrugated chest bones, concave stomach and thin blonde hair were considered the embodiment of beauty in Europe, even though the Ambossans considered me ugly as sin” (*BR*: 31). The author completes this reversed racialized regime of representation by parodying what is supposed to be the African ideal of beauty. Madama Blessing wore “a beautiful glazed-ivory bone shot through her nose and a lip plug pierced through her bottom lip showed she was a woman with a husband” (*BR*: 17). These different black and white ideals suggest that women, including those in a dominant or empowered position, are equally affected by expectations about how to look and dress. Evaristo clearly interlinks slavery with patriarchal cultural norms, introducing a gender dimension into the debate and stressing the double colonization suffered by her Whyte slaves.

Consequently, Doris ends up sarcastically assessing that she suffers from “image issues” (*BR*: 31) because of the Ambossans's systematic rejection of her physique. She borrows the positive identification strategy of the 1960s Black Power movement —

“Black is beautiful”— to unsettle the essentially white gaze on the black body, laying bare the contradictions of its use and challenging its reductionism: “Every morning I’d repeat an uplifting mantra to myself while looking at the mirror. I’d try not to see the ‘pinched nostrils, pasty skin, greasy hair, pale shifty eyes and flat bottom’ which the Ambossans labelled inferior” ’ (BR: 31-32). Instead she voices her own beauty manifest:

I may be *fair* and *flaxen*. I may have *slim* nostrils and *slender* lips. I may have *oil-rich* hair and a *non-rotund* bottom. I may blush easily, go *rubicund* in the sun and *have covert yet mentally alert* blue eyes. Yes, I may be whyte. But I am whyte and I am beautiful! (BR: 32).

Evaristo pictures a protagonist who adopts, in this case, the “black mask”, but is simultaneously well aware of these more subtle mechanisms of subjection and consciously tries to fight them back.

Doris’s observations also reveal the enslavers’ strategy to eliminate the possibility that slaves lead a normal life. This includes her love relationship with another slave, Frank, which ends dramatically when he is deported to the West Japanese Islands. Through Doris and Frank’s subplot, Evaristo insists that the enslaver’s exploitation works on many levels and involves an important sexual component. The consequences of this exploitation are atrocious; Doris’s and Frank’s three children are taken away at birth and their fate remains unknown to their parents. Although Evaristo portrays Doris’s grief and sorrow with a silence that haunts the entire story, reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1997), she also confers on Doris the capacity to analyse the strategies of enslavement to which she is subjected: “slaves don’t end relationships. Other people do it for us. Often we don’t start them either, other people do it for us. We’re encouraged to breed merely to increase the workforce. [...] My three

were sold on” (BR: 21). Bwana’s household becomes thus representative of the enslaver’s apparatus of power.

Significantly, Evaristo’s transposition of the enslaver’s world also highlights the fact that the procedures of enslavement and slavery directly affect the enslaver (Bhabha 2008; Morrison 1992). Although Evaristo particularly emphasises this point in “Book Two”, Doris already anticipates in her account the psychological weaknesses and internal flaws of the enslaver’s system. One example of this ambivalence is Bwana’s reaction to the aforementioned minstrel representations. Evaristo seems to emphasize once more the enslaver’s hidden fears of the slaves and the need to obsessively and repeatedly ridicule them:

Bwana and his huge extended family went to the Palladia every year. They [...] returned singing the minstrel songs very loudly thinking they were being so damned funny. It was a kind of madness, because the performing caricatures they mimicked bore no relation the whytes in their service. Still, credit where it’s due, it was the only time they tried to entertain the staff. (BR: 43)

By transferring the mocking tone from Bwana’s character towards Doris’s critical observations and psycho-sociological analysis of the enslaver’s world, Evaristo ultimately bestows Doris with the power to contest and subvert Bwana’s racial and colonial discourse. Likewise, Doris observes that Madama Blessing’s power to oppress is accompanied by her fear that the slaves question and contest that power:

[S]he had bucket-loads of self-pity, which was often the case with our masters – *they* were the injured ones, not us. She wore her favourite outfit made out of Adinkra cloth. It was stamped with the design known as *Atamfo Atwameho*, which means ‘Enemies Surround Me’. (BR: 18)

In line with Bhabha’s ideas on colonial discourse and stereotyping processes, Madama Blessing is never wholly in control of her own enslaving strategies and her

misreading “opens up a space of interpretation and misappropriation that inscribes an ambivalence at the very origins of colonial authority” (Bhabha 2008: 135). Madama Blessing, complementing Bwana’s uncanny fear and ambivalence in “Book Two”, implies therefore a far more complex social relationship than a mere blak-whyte binary structure of power would suggest.

In the same line, Evaristo clearly counteracts the homogenising function of stereotypes with her depiction of her fellow slaves Gertraude Schulz, renamed Yomisi, and Princess Olivia de Champfleur, renamed Sitembile. Evaristo dismisses the image of slaves as a uniform mass reinforcing their previously aristocratic status as well as their diverse national origins. This concurs with Doris’s remark about the enslaver’s ignorance of the internal differences of the slaves: “The Ambossans called us tribes but we were many nations, each with our own language an funny old customs, like the Border Landers, whose men wore tartan skirts with no knickers underneath” (*BR*: 7). Similarly, the Ambossans are not presented as an homogeneous group either. During her flight through Londolo, Doris describes “the regular impoverished masses of the city, the Ambossan working classes” (*BR*: 27), whose “gamine children were bug-eyed with chiselled cheekbones, slack lips, sunken chests, bony hips and spindly heron’s legs” (*BR*: 28), in a portrait reminiscent of Dickensian narratives. Londolo therefore reflects the differences and tensions that exist not only *between* but also *within* both groups: Ambossans and slaves. Moreover, Evaristo mentions tensions that are well known to the immigrant and diasporic population of contemporary London. For instance, when free slaves are rebuked by working class Blaks with: ““Wigger, go home! You’re taking our jobs!”” (*BR*: 28). Nevertheless, these internal differences and tensions give rise to new alliances that, once more, resist and subvert the enslaver’s

discourse, since “it was a little-known fact that some of the Ambossan working class were active in the Resistance, united with us in the fight against the ruling class” (*BR*: 28).

These alliances are equally subjected to an ambivalent representation as we see, for instance, in relation to Doris’s last assistant Ezinwene, who waits at the docks to help her escape. Contrarily to Doris’s previous helpers, Ezinwene embodies everything Doris rejects from the enslaving Ambossans and her words reveal a tendency to objectify the enslaved other:

‘I’ve heard what happens on those awful ships and in the colonies. You poor, dear, sweet, tormented, unfortunate thing. How you must have suffered.’ [...] She then cocked her head to one side and half-smiled at me with –well, there’s a fine line between sympathy and pity and someone had just stepped over it. (*BR*: 70)

Her figure stands therefore not only for the enslaver’s ambivalent attitude towards slaves but also for a patronizing assistance of victims that ultimately promotes their suppression. Ezinwene’s attitude presupposes a passive victimhood that will be completely rejected throughout *Blonde Roots*. By repeatedly offering Doris and other slaves the possibility of subtle acts of resistance and sometimes hidden strategies of contestation, Evaristo displaces the traditional politics of racial representation and of black victimhood, endowing her slave protagonists, and especially the female ones, with agency and an empowering capacity to survive:

In returning my life to its rightful owner –me- I would also be putting my life at stake. If I wasn’t careful or lucky I’d end up at the local whipping post or chopping block. [...] Then my survival instincts kicked in. [...] My head cleared. I was back again. [...] I stood up and looked at the wooden mask of Bwana’s face on the wall. [...] And I gave it the right, royal one finger salute. (*BR*: 5).

Hence, every time Evaristo describes the absolute power of the Ambossan masters and the atrocities of their subjugation, among which are to be included the

renaming of slaves or the branding of the masters' initials onto her bodies, she allows Doris or other slaves to exert some kind of resistance. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of Yomisi, Bwana's cook, who is forced to wear a metal muzzle in order to prevent her from eating the master's food. Evaristo counteracts such atrocity by conferring on Yomisi the power to poison Bwana and his family: "All fingers pointed to the juju of Bwana's business enemies, none at the passive, stick-like cook. [...] Crushed glass. [...] Rotten meat disguised by strong herbs and spices. [...] Plants she would not name. [...] It was the only thing that gave her pleasure" (*BR*: 15).

Although slaves are forced to repeat and adopt the enslaver's customs, language, dressing code, ideal of beauty, even a new name, they have also the capacity to mock or parody the enslavers. As Bhabha claims, rather than to re-present the enslaver's culture, they mockingly repeat and mimic that power (2008: 125). As Doris explains: "After that I met all my performance targets. I was also expected to look presentable at all times and I learned how to affect a pleasant smile devoid of any personal satisfaction. Our 'contentment' must never exceed theirs" (*BR*: 24). Consequently, Doris becomes an expert in deciphering the enslaver's attitudes and moods suggesting the existence, in Bhabha's words, of the "displacing gaze of the disciplined where the observer becomes the observed" (2008: 127). Whereas Bhabha insists on the existence of multiple spaces of interpretation due to the ambivalence inherent in colonial authority, Evaristo focuses more on the victim's gaze as a form of resisting power conferring it a feminist dimension. The gaze is an important critical concept in gender and feminist studies as revealed for instance, in Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In this study, Mulvey affirms that scopophilia is the basis of Western Culture and the notion of the gaze can be used to critique power relations. In this sense, and similarly to

Foucault's thesis on surveillance, visibility can be considered as a key element in regimes of patriarchal power and as a constitutional part in the formation and structuration of modern society. Evaristo stresses the different positionalities of the protagonist are defined by the various relationships between observer and observed. She also subverts the asymmetric power relations between master and slave which are embodied by the respective gazes.

For example, Doris's encounter with Bamwoze, Bwana's favourite son becomes paradigmatic of Evaristo's reversal of the victim's gaze. In spite of being wet nursed in his childhood by Doris and having shown his opposition to the Ambossan enslaving system, he finally follows his father's steps in becoming a slave trader himself. When Doris meets Bamwoze just before arriving at the underground railway, the reader is aware that he could easily betray his former nurse:

I didn't move and neither did he. I could see the indecision in his eyes, weighing up the options, which one would benefit him the most. If I moved, I would make up his mind for him and he would raise the alarm. [...] I knew better than to plead with my eyes because he would feel manipulated and resist. If I looked afraid, he would despise me. So I just went blank –the slaves' default position. Then I sensed a thought take shape in his mind. To let me go would be a way to get back at his father. [...] We both knew that I had read him. (*BR*: 36-37)

In this regard, Doris's self-consciousness of her invisibility as slave has to be interpreted not as a lack of action but as a crucial element of resistance. Therefore, looking, observing and reading somebody's behaviour becomes not only a recurring element in Doris's analysis of stereotypes, but also in her resistance to the enslavers:

It is the skill of a great slave to predict the master's moods and needs before he himself knows what they are. [...] I was expert at reading his facial expressions, body language and intonation. Peripheral vision was also essential, as well as an ability, after so many years, to sense his deeper yearnings. (*BR*: 41)

This capacity to “read” or analyse the enslaving other enables Doris to become sensitive to the multiple stereotypes which, as we have seen, permeate the enslaver’s discourse. Equally, this capacity to predict and decode the oppressor’s actions allows Doris to successfully overcome several confrontational encounters and, in the end, survive enslavement.

4.2. Re-presenting diasporic histories and memories: “England”

Doris’s journey through Londolo alternates with a series of flashbacks that recall her childhood and youth in England. Through Doris’s eyes, the reader observes the entangled mechanisms of societies, the Ambossan slave trading economy and her European feudal society. During her desperate flight, Doris confesses her intense longing to return home to England. Not without irony, she yearns for the “Grey Continent” with its “cloudy grey skies” (*BR*: 7) and “the incessant drizzle and harsh wind” (*BR*: 7). Evaristo explores thus the themes of belonging and home, relevant in both slave and diasporic narratives. These topoi reinforce the impression that Doris’s past is simultaneously re-imagined and true.

Evaristo is thus very careful to avoid any idealization in Doris’s representation of her motherland and, as suggested before, tinges her portrayal with irony. By employing quintessentially English names and features, Evaristo additionally confers to Doris’s childhood memories the romantic glow of a fairy-tale. Doris lovingly describes her house, “Apple Tree Cottage” (*BR*: 9) and her parents “Mr Jack and Eliza Scagglethorpe” (*BR*: 10), as part of “a long line of cabbage farmers” (*BR*: 7). The multiple references to traditional fairy tales are systematically frustrated functioning thus as a feminist critique

of patriarchal forms of storytelling. The first fairy tale motif the novel borrows is Cinderella's lost glass slippers (*BR*: 11-12). Evaristo successfully subverts it in transposing Doris's dreams of a fairy tale future into a nightmare. The author uses this mimetic retelling as a kind of prolepsis in order to subvert the reader's expectations in relation to Doris's fate, and by extension, to critique the utopian stereotype of "Merry England". Slavery, in whichever form, does not allow for any kind of happy ending and, as Doris's narrative demonstrates, is firmly anchored in patriarchal societies.

A second example of a thwarted fairy element is introduced by Doris's sister Sharon who: "expected her prince to arrive one day on a white stallion and star in her very own once-upon-a-time" (*BR*: 47). Sharon's dream stands in strong opposition not only to the rough reality of feudal society, but also to Sharon's individual future, as she will be captured, sold and forced to become Bwana's mistress even bearing some of his half-caste children. The cynical observation by Doris's mother that "in this life there were 'fairy-tale castles' and 'peasant shit-houses', and wasn't it a pity not to have a choice" (*BR*: 50) might be also interpreted as an anticipation of Doris's spoiled childhood and posterior enslavement as well as an announcement of her unsuccessful attempt to escape. Both examples convey thus that women were not only subjected like men to the ruling economic system, but, they were additionally prepared "to be wives and mothers" (*BR*: 51) and had to submit to the patriarchal imperatives on womanhood.

In this regard, Doris is well aware of the imperfections of what the reader recognizes as a Medieval society: "We weren't landowners, oh no, we were *serfs*, the bottom link in the agricultural food chain, although no actual chains clinked on the ground when we walked around" (*BR*: 8). Doris's parents occupied a plot of land and were required to work for their feudal master and Lord of the Manor, "Perceval

Montague” or —as his serfs mockingly call him— “Percy”. As explained in the previous chapter, Evaristo dismantles the power of this feudal master through another tyrant, Bwana, who enslaves “Lord Perceval” ignoring his wealth and status in his own society. This actually happened in those African countries where both Europeans and members of other African tribes, nations or social classes were enslaved.¹⁴ Hence, Evaristo reminds us that “slavery is not, nor has it ever been, confined to race or to the transatlantic slave trade” (Collins 2008: 1200). Doris’s subtle analysis, reminiscent of Nietzsche’s epigraph, is also related to Gilroy’s concern that the history of slavery and its heritage is not exclusively assigned to coloured people (1993) but inherently forms part of British and European history in general.

In this regard, Doris’s account also emphasizes power as the defining element of any system, whether sustained by feudalism or slavery. This is shown by the traditional ballad “Scarborough Fair” (*BR*: 13) sung by Doris’s father after a day of hard work. This traditional English folk song operates on many metaphorical levels, but by recalling the requirement of lovers to fulfil a series of impossible tasks, it implies the idea that it is impossible to escape the subjugation of this kind of economic and social system. Although in compensation for their work, Doris’s parents are entitled to protection, justice and the right to exploit certain fields in order to maintain their own subsistence, the protagonist sarcastically observes that this contract does not rely on reciprocal rights and equal conditions but is defined by power relations: “we were charged for extras such as taking [Perceval’s] cart to go to market or using his grain mill or bread oven, which, if we had poor harvests, meant a debt carried over on our annual

¹⁴ In an interview Evaristo insists on this point by explaining that “North Africans along the Barbary Coast did actually enslave around one million Europeans from around the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries” (Collins 2008: 1200).

accounts for several years” (*BR*: 8). While Evaristo focuses on the possibility of a veiled resistance in Londolo, she ends Doris’s account of her “BS [Before Slavery] days” (*BR*: 55) implying that any contestation on the serf’s side was virtually impossible.

However, in comparing feudalism and transatlantic slavery, Evaristo additionally highlights that the latter was primarily based on racial notions. This is particularly emphasised by the intertextual references to more recent neo-slave narratives: *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) by Alex Haley, through which Evaristo establishes a vivid dialogue with both works considered in their respective decades as groundbreaking. The following citation illustrates Evaristo’s intertextual dialogue with Morrison’s novel: “Madge, Sharon, Alice. Beloved. Beloved. Beloved. Slave or dead? Slave or dead? Dead or Slave?” (*BR*: 46). In Morrison’s novel, memory and fantasy intermingle and evolve into a parallel reality in order to cope with the holocaust of slavery and its consequent traumas. Evaristo seems to share Morrison’s preoccupations and conclusions about the racial nature of slavery.

In her most recent novel *A Mercy* (2008), Morrison also describes the beginnings of slavery in the United States insisting that in North America slavery was primarily based upon racial assumptions and had therefore to be constructed, implanted, institutionalized and, finally, legalized (Neary 2008). In the same way, Evaristo employs references from Haley’s *Roots* to describe, for instance, Doris’s birth: ““Doris Scagglethorpe –behold the only thing greater than yourself”” (*BR*: 57), quoting the famous words by Kunta Kinte’s father in *Roots* (Haley 2007: 4). It can be argued that Evaristo’s intertextual references contribute to portray the emotional world of the slaves—for which these two landmark novels actually stand—revealing also personal

histories that have been concealed to a broader readership (Annex 7.1). In the same way as the previously mentioned thwarted fairy tales, these intertextual references are fundamental to understand Evaristo's process of transposition. They transpose Doris's memories into an alternative and diasporic narration of the past that stresses the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances (Braidotti 2011: 188). Additionally, they also mark the transition to the chapters devoted to Doris's kidnapping and subsequent first years of enslavement particularly stressing her journey through the Middle Passage.

In "It" (*BR*: 58), a brief but essential chapter, Doris depicts the horrifying moment of her kidnapping. Its briefness highlights both Doris's defencelessness and the traumatic effect of the abducting experience —"It was as fast and shocking as that" (*BR*: 58)— and introduces the reader to the unfathomable fate of so many slaves. The subsequent chapter "Daylight Robbery" similarly emphasises Doris suffering and her subjection to a regime of power based upon racial assumptions. Suddenly colour, as the only signifier of ethnicity, turns out to be the determining factor that forces Doris to leave behind her old relationships and join a new "wretched" community (*BR*: 62). As Doris claims, in a crucial quote: "If I had to pinpoint a moment when the human race divided into the severe distinctions of blak and whyte, that was it: people belonged to one of two colours and in the society I was about to join my colour, not my personality or ability, would determine my fate" (*BR*: 75). From this point on it becomes clear that racial slavery dehumanizes the captured subject to the point that they lose the control of their bodies. As Doris observes, she is transformed into a mere commodity: "It was no longer I who decided whether I walked to my right, to my left, backwards or forwards, and at what speed" (*BR*: 63). What is more, differences of nationality, social status,

religion, gender and age are equally erased: “[r]egardless of social status, profession, political or religious persuasion, we were all going to the final frontier of Europa –the end of civilisation as we knew it” (*BR*: 62).

These passages also introduce Doris’s narration of “The Middle Passage”. In this chapter devoted to this atrocious journey, Evaristo’s once again employs a historical register of events that reproduces the experiences of the slaves:

“Below deck the storage system was both unisex and utilitarian: planks of wood formed shelves which ran in six parallel rows the entire length of the hold. [...] The shelves were space-effective and cost-effective, I later found out. There were two available options: the Tight Fit, which allowed for an extra 30 per cent of cargo, but with a downside of increased fatalities. Or the Loose Fit, which offered more space per person, but also resulting in reduced profit” (*BR*: 78).

Leaving behind the lyrical reminiscences of her childhood memories, she interestingly combines informal language—for instance when she refers to the “Tight Fit” and the “Loose Fit”—with descriptions of appallingly physical cruelty. Although these juxtapositions seem to give the impression that Doris’s trauma compromises her ability to communicate or even that her experiences as a slave are being trivialized (Hiller 2008: 20), they create a tension and a sense of contemporaneity that is typical of Evaristo’s chronotopes and transpositions. Through them, Evaristo simultaneously confers a kind of connectedness and realism to the narration that constitutes a transferral to modern readership of how it feels to be enslaved, as Diana Evans suggests (2008).

Resorting once again to Morrison’s *Beloved*, Evaristo also peoples these chapters with ghost like characters that linger between sanity and madness. She seems to suggest that to lose oneself in daydreams and illusions is the last and, perhaps unique, strategy to survive these atrocities and resist suicide. An example is the enslaved thirteen year old Jane who, on account of her pregnancy, dreams of better treatment:

“May be her own cabin? A bed? Dress? Basin? Soap? Washrag? Comb? Blanket? [...] Yes, any day now. [...] Jane had travelled so deeply into fantasy she had lost her way back” (BR: 87). Significantly, this need to get lost in imaginary worlds becomes a strategy for both the slaves and the perpetrators as we can see, for instance, in the case of the slaver’s Captain Wabwire, whose “canary-yellow caftan [...] was encrusted with food droppings. The plaits in his hair were dried-up and coming undone. His eyes had lost their sheen. His skin was dulled. His expression, numb” (BR: 92).

In representing characters like the captain, the ship’s surgeon Nwonkorey, and even the sailors, as being close to madness illustrates “what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters” (Morrison 1992: 12), that is, Evaristo explores the effects of slavery on both sides, while implying the historical interpretation of slavery is not closed. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison points out that there exists a “pattern of thinking about racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim – of always defining it asymmetrically from the perspective of its impact on the objects of racist policy and attitudes” (1992: 11). Evaristo does not follow this asymmetrical representation; Doris explains that despite the atrocious experience of the Middle Passage, there were also moments of resistance. An example can be seen in the behaviour of her new friend Garanwyn who establishes new bonds of solidarity between slaves, stands by Doris in her worst moments and endeavours to initiate a rebellion on the slaver. Although the slaves do not succeed; the novel stresses the actual acts of rebellion¹⁵ and resistance, presenting the slaves not as passive victims, but as capable of agency.

¹⁵ The exact number of shipboard rebellions is unknown, but historians have documented over 400 cases only in the eighteenth century (Taylor 2006).

Evaristo enhances these oppositional strategies in the chapter entitled “Oh Little Miracle”, in which Doris remembers her first years of enslavement. After having survived the Middle Passage, she is bought by her first owners as a companion to their only daughter Little Miracle in New Ambossa on West Japan. During this last childhood years, Doris experiences not only the process of subordination and adaptation to enslavement —“I was beginning to realise these people couldn’t see me” (*BR*: 95)— but also the gradual effects of the enslaver’s othering process:

‘You ugly,’ she said, putting on baby-speak, as if that excused her rudeness, pointing at my face in the reflection of a pool of water after the rains. [...] ‘Me pretty,’ she said, preening herself. [...] She was right, of course. [...] And there was no one in that society to tell me otherwise. (*BR*: 97)

Passages like this remind us Fanon’s lessons on cultural alienation and psychic identification. But Evaristo once more bestows Doris with the power to confront and reject the imposed Ambossan image opening up the possibility to contest the system from within. This crystallises in the following scene:

We stood facing one another. [...] Mistress and slave. [...] I did not lower my eyes as usual. [...] How dare she consign me to the worst kind of hell? For what? [...] I rushed at her with the amassed rage of all those people torn from their families and sentenced to labour for life without payment; all those people suffering unbelievable horrors at the hands of their masters. [...] My surprised, sluggish mistress, disabled by her neck rings and wrappa, tipped backwards, slowly, into the river (*BR*: 103-104).

The chapter ends with Little Miracle’s drowning. Miraculously, Doris will never be discovered. By rejecting any victimization on the slave, Evaristo acknowledges that these subtle forms of resistance and contestation are born out of what Foucault referred to as the circularity of power (1980) which accompanies the complex dialectics of oppression and subordination. This emphasis on resistance and contestation becomes a central issue in “Book Three” devoted to Doris’s life on Bwana’s plantation. As I will

show, Evaristo enhances these themes locating Doris again on the West Japanese Islands after her capture. There she will be subjected to the most dreadful form of racial slavery: plantation slavery.

But Doris's diasporic journey does not end with Book Two. In the first two chapters of "Book Three" she attempts to leave Londolo by water on a slaver passing by several riverside districts towards the estuary of the River Temz —the re-imagined Thames. These chapters evolve in a lingering atmosphere of foreboding danger as Doris is painfully aware of Bwana's approach. Reminding the reader that the slaveholder "owed" her (BR: 157), Doris outguesses his reactions and keeps one step ahead of Bwana. During the journey on the ship that is supposed to bring her home, Doris starts to ponder upon her fears and hopes regarding her future. In accordance, the chapter's title —"Oh Sweet Chariot"— refers to the well known American spiritual song that recalls the yearning for home and freedom of Afro-American slaves. These are only some of the multiple allusions to gospels, counting rhymes and literary allusions in the chapters' titles, which combine references to the oral tradition of slaves and feminist reworkings of diverse narrative traditions. For instance, Evaristo once again reinforces Doris's longing through a thwarted fairy tale element: "Once upon a time I'd had the hope of a decent future" (BR: 157) or imaginings of a dreamlike life with her family and her companion Frank: "*There are three other teenagers there too. Two girls and a boy. The girls look the spitting of me and the boy is a dead cert for Frank*" (BR: 163, emphasis in the original). Significantly, this is one of the novel's few references to her lost children, a reminder that slavery has not only ruined Doris's past but has also frustrated any possibility to live her future life in freedom.

Furthermore, this passage is punctuated by intertextual references presented parenthetically. It opens with a reworked citation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* — "Waterborne creatures rippled in the river. [...] Airborne creatures flapped around me. [...] The darkness wrapped me up. [...] The darkness held me. [...] The darkness carried me" (BR: 162)— and closes with an allusion to Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) — "The stars were close enough to pluck and wear as jewellery. [...] A pair of star-diamond earrings" (BR: 163). In Morrison's novel, the earrings function not only as a kind of token and symbol for the invisible bounds between mother and daughter but also between the enslaved past and the arduous construction of a new future. These two specific references form part of a wider exercise of intertextuality in relation to both novels that work to reinforce the idea of transposition at both a thematic and narrative level.

The reference to Conrad can also be seen as the culmination of Doris's contemplation of the River Temz. While in Book Two, Evaristo describes the natural settings of Doris's homeland from Bwana's point of view, playing with colonial assumptions of strangeness and exoticism seen in Conrad's text, here Evaristo transposes Conrad's menacing and ambivalent notion of darkness into a positive and protective element, erasing the negative connotation traditionally associated with the term "dark". Thus, Evaristo enhances this intertextual transposition through the combination of a typical English landscape and an imagined exotic African environment. The London district of Woolwich with its historical Royal Armoury is transformed into "the arsenal town of Wool Wi Che, famous for manufacturing the finest, spears, shields, crossbows, poison darts, muskets and cannons in the world" (BR: 160) and the otherwise familiar marshlands of the River Thames become mangroves

populated with water buffalos and crocodiles. As Doris approaches the city of “Dartfor” she observes that: “Under the arches of a bridge skateboarding teenage boys with wild Aphros, beaded corsets and leather jockstraps hurtled up its sweeping walls, turned, hovered mid-air, then skidded down again with a whoop and a flourish” (*BR*: 161).

As I have been arguing so far, Evaristo transposes diasporic sites in synchronising African and European re-imagined locations. Likewise, the author’s constant interweaving of literary references to works that are concerned with black identity and slavery truly underlines McLeod’s hypothesis of a wider literary project or shift towards a “contemporary black writing of Britain” (2011: 46). But these simultaneous representations of “chronotopias” are not limited to the transposed natural locations of Londolo, the Cabbage Coast or the river Temz. In the light of Evaristo’s intertextual dialogue with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Morrison’s *Beloved*, it is possible to argue that McLeod’s understanding of transposition has to be complemented with that of Braidotti. Her multiple references to issues of female identity and to feminist concerns show that Evaristo’s transposition has a gendered perspective in line with Braidotti’s theoretical framework. The multiple references to Morrison’s novel confirm this last point. Morrison was not only one of the first writers to draw her attention to the problematic of “whiteness” (1992), but also to write her novels from a gendered viewpoint. In these chapters, the aforementioned image of the earrings links her story with Morrison’s *Sethe*. In this regard, Evaristo’s examination of racialized regimes of representation and previous slave narratives leads her not only to focus on “whiteness”, British history and contemporary social issues, or to reinterpret blackness connecting it to other social variables as gender and class issues as already proposed by Cuder-Domínguez (2004: 173-188; 2011: 68-73). *Blonde Roots* seems to additionally

engage with an affirmative otherness based upon an oppositional consciousness that consists of “multiple micropolitical practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations” (Braidotti 2011: 287). The following chapter will finally draw into sharp focus this affirmative otherness and the slaves’ oppositional consciousness.



YINKA SHONIBARE, *PARTY TIME: RE-IMAGINE AMERICA* (2009)

5. Transposing alterity: toxic difference, female solidarity

In this chapter, I want to examine the third part of Doris's account in which she describes her deportation to Bwana's plantation "Home Sweet Home" in the West Japanese Islands and her finally successful second escape. Interestingly, this part is characterized by yet another shift in Evaristo's representation of slaves and enslavers. Whereas in the previous Books the author mainly challenged the traditional representation of otherness through what I have been calling the transposition of race and diasporic sites, this time Evaristo stresses difference through the transposition of alterity.

As I have been arguing so far, the author's strategy of transposing historical facts, diasporic settings, economic systems and racial discourses, offers an insight to those markers of otherness that have been used to impose and establish racial and social divisions. Another key aspect to articulate Ambossan dominance and the slaves' resistance is the definition of alterity as it was its identification with inferiority what ultimately ensured the enslaver's dominant position. But in Bwana's plantation, described in Book Three, Evaristo identifies these multiple markers of otherness as *positive* features through which it becomes possible to articulate a new community and blur the binary opposition established by the slaveholder's colour line.

In Evaristo's representation of plantation slavery —the most radical form of institutionalized racism— resistance and contestation rely more on rearticulating the markers of difference into characteristics that intrinsically define culture and community than on adjusting to dominant and imposed forms of representation and stereotyping. That is to say, alterity, in spite of its association with inferiority is enacted as the positive means for the slaves' resistance and contestation. Doris's description of her life

in the community of plantation slaves can be understood as a form of transposition as she leaps from one axis of difference into another “playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme of its own” (Braidotti 2008: 5).

Shonibare’s installation “Party Time: Re-Imagine America” (2009) constitutes a perfect match of Doris’s account and illustrates the complex notions of chronotope and transposition which I want to develop in this chapter. In this piece, Shonibare stages an imagined scene of a late nineteenth century dinner party where headless figures are seated around an elaborately set table that serves as poignant remainder of Victorian etiquette. Despite the apparently strict rules of social etiquette, the figures’ animated body language suggests a scene of self-indulgence and debauchery that prompts comparison with our contemporary culture of greed and material excess (Newark Museum 2010). This work clearly tallies with Doris’s description of the lavish enslaver’s plantation and home. Shonibare’s beheaded figures are dressed in period costume made from his typical Dutch wax fabric, with which he subverts the signifiers of Victorian industrialization and restores power to the subaltern. In a sense, this relates to another aspect of Doris’s account, as Evaristo replaces the slaves’ power to resist enslavement by allowing Doris to take advantage of the enslaver’s self-indulgence during a rollicking feast in which she eventually manages to escape.

Bearing Shonibare’s image and its reflections in the narrative in mind, I will look at Evaristo’s representation of the multiple cultural interactions that occur in the hybrid spaces of Doris’s new destination. Evaristo particularly engages with themes that have been present before, as for instance, patriarchy, hybridity and slave’s resistance; but here, these themes evoke additional dimensions regarding the notion of racial alterity or difference. It is possible to argue that Book Three mainly presents two

dimensions: one is centred on the consequences of racial alterity and the slave's endurances of plantation slavery; the other dimension is dominated by the description of the slave's resistance and their constant contestation of the system. Significantly, in the last chapters of Doris's account, it becomes clear that the slaves' opposition is not only based upon hybridity but also solidarity. These new interactions induce the protagonist to embark on a last successful escape which, as I seek to disclose, transposes the notion of difference in the aforementioned sense. In the following pages I will consider these two dimensions.

5.1. Living with toxic alterity: “*Thus will you know the difference*”

In the first chapters of “Book Three”, Evaristo brings to an end the alternation of Doris's and Bwana's narrative voices drawing into sharp focus the notion of difference held up by the enslaver's discourse. As previously mentioned, this part of Doris's account engages in a vivid dialogue and constant interweaving of literary references to Morrison's *Beloved*. In this way, Evaristo combines Morrison's gendered and racial concerns with her own understanding of the interconnectedness of history, race and gender. Moreover, the negative charge of diasporic subjects is transformed into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex alliances (Braidotti 2011: 288).

Evaristo's transposition of *Beloved* into Doris's narrative becomes especially evident in the chapter “Eeny Meeny Miny Moo”, sardonically called after the children's counting rhyme. In this chapter, Bwana finally hunts Doris down while she is making a last attempt to escape her fate running into the Ambossan jungle. Similar to Morrison's

protagonist Sethe, Doris flees on foot “over mulch and twigs, over stones and moss, through ferns and bracken, over mud and pools and rocky streams. [...] My feet quickly sore. They did not complain. [...] My legs scratched against thorns. They did not complain” (*BR*: 165-166). In these extremely painful and dramatic passages that reenact the phenomenon of fugitive slaves, Doris adopts a more serious and dignified poetic voice: “Mossy twigs could have been vipers. [...] Black leaves could have been scorpions. [...] Small rocks could have been porcupines” (*BR*: 166). In juxtaposing repetitions with antithesis, Evaristo builds up an increasing tension allowing the reader to identify with Doris’s struggle: “I listened all night while I scrambled through the undergrowth. [...] I listened in the morning when I was sure they would have found me. [...] I listened in the afternoon when I climbed in the cradle of a thick tree and slept, for a few minutes (*BR*: 167). As Doris’s narration advances, the sentences tend to become shorter and their meaning more intense: “Overnight my legs had swollen to twice their normal size. [...] My soles were butchered. My sores oozed pus. My cuts were bleeding” (*BR*: 167). This is again a direct reference to Sethe’s story, whose flight also ends with swollen legs at the shores of a big river.

Sethe also gets the help of a white girl and succeeds in crossing the river that will grant her freedom. But this freedom is merely physical, since in Morrison’s story, Sethe’s is still psychologically traumatised and as her infanticide demonstrates, her psyche is bound to the enslaving structures of her former plantation “Sweet Home”. Conversely, Doris’s evolution throughout Book Three will be the opposite. Despite Doris’s condition, all slaves are psychologically strong and manage to survive and even contest slavery without being affected by Sethe’s self-destruction. This is achieved thanks to the solidarity between enslaved women in the plantation, a solidarity that is

suspended at this point when the Ambossan women prevent Doris from escaping: “I eased myself onto my feet in the vain hope of running but the helper woman pinned my arms from behind” (*BR*: 169). Hence, Bwana’s presence and his announcement of an atrocious punishment erase any chance of emerging interracial solidarity.

But by introducing a brief chapter —ironically entitled “Justice is Served”— narrated from Bwana’s perspective, Evaristo will also emphasise the fact that Doris’s capture will imply a radical change between her former life in Londolo and her new life in the plantation. In fact, Doris’s capture will lead her into a very different kind of slavery from her somewhat privileged former position as a house slave. Her punishment becomes the line that marks the institutionalisation of racial difference in plantation slavery. Bwana’s words: “*Thus* will you know the difference” (*BR*: 169) lead the reader into subsequent chapters, where, Doris narrates her life on Bwana’s plantation “Home Sweet Home” to which she is banished after her punishment. Additionally, the plantation’s name is again a clear reference to Morrison’s *Beloved*. From this point, and in consonance with Morrison’s plantation “Sweet Home”, racialized alterity determines Doris’s future life. But, as I will show, Evaristo portrays racial difference not merely a binary opposition between blak and whyte. On the contrary, alterity is predicated along multiple and interconnected axes of differentiation that shape Doris’s and the other slaves’ lives. Significantly, what enables Doris to endure plantation life are the aforementioned “multiple micropolitical practices of daily activism” (Braidotti 2011: 287) and the solidary help of the different enslaved women. What is more, Doris’s successful escape equally depends on the conscious and unconscious confluence of the racially and socially disparate members of the plantation. Doris’s flight is actually

prompted by the discovery of the danger Ye Memé's sons, Yao and Dingiswao, would have to face if they were to remain at "Home Sweet Home".

Echoing the exoticism associated with islands of the Caribbean, the chapter "Paradise Island" begins with Doris's arrival in "Home Sweet Home" after her deportation to the West Japanese Islands. During this second and definitive crossing, Doris convalesces from Bwana's harsh punishment of two hundred and one lashes. Doris's story is once more connected to Morrison's *Beloved*, since both protagonists are punished with lashes on their back. In this sense, both novelists invoke the physical endurances of enslavement. The scars on both women's backs represent slavery as a profound bodily experience as both Sethe and Doris have their specific geopolitical and historical locations tattooed on their bodies, to paraphrase Braidotti (2011: 14). Confronted with the plantation slaves and her future work in the sugar mill, Doris becomes aware that surviving enslavement becomes a matter of physical strength and endurance:

I had to survive, not just that afternoon, but the following days, months, years. Non-stop drudgery preceding an early death? I knew the stats –one in three slaves didn't survive the first three years in the New World. [...] Bwana was right: 'Thus will you know the difference'. (BR: 181).

In this regard, one fundamental theme in these last chapters is the murderous consequences of the racialized interpretation of alterity represented by the plantation system. Accordingly, Evaristo gives a detailed explanation of the mechanisms of plantation life. She describes, for instance, the slave's work at a sugar mill, a very dangerous process as historical data confirms and which Evaristo describes metaphorically when referring to Doris's first day at work as one of feeding an insatiable monster: "I returned to work stuffing the Mouth, which masticated the stalks

–grunting, spitting, dribbling, swallowing the sap-saliva down into its digestive system with burps and belches, until it was pissed out as a gushing white foam [...]” (BR: 180). With descriptions like this, Evaristo emphasises that slaves have a purely economic purpose on the plantation system as Doris’s new friend Ye Memé remarks in the creole language spoken by the slaves: “Wurk! Iz work we hav to do. We nyot here to be happee. We nyot here to rest. We here to make plentee-plentee monee for Massa Nonso. Iz work what we do, gyal. Wurk! Wurk! Wurk!” (BR: 182). Evaristo brings to an end Doris’s previous life as she ironically realises that “the gap between myself and blue-collar slaves had well and truly closed” (BR: 182).

Consequently, Doris will be completely immersed in plantation slavery; particularly when she becomes, at a later point of her trajectory, a cane cutter in the plantation’s sugar cane fields, one of the hardest tasks, reserved for the strongest slaves:

The slip of a machete could mean loss of a body part. [...] Stalks, stumps and sharp leaves left me riddled with cuts. [...] Bending over all day to cut the cane was crippling. [...] Setting fire to the fields to destroy the weeds and pests, but not the cane, created fumes which left me wheezing for weeks. (BR: 210)

Because of Evaristo’s historical accuracy in reflecting the mechanisms of the plantation system and slaves’ lives, her goals could be also understood as didactic.¹⁶ Doris’s remarks on the master’s atrocious punishments are another aspect of Evaristo’s unsparing realistic yet didactic portrayal of plantation life. The racialized difference of

¹⁶As Cuder-Domínguez has argued, *Blonde Roots* encourages “particularly the younger generations to learn more about a generally neglected past, which seldom features in programmes of study in the U.K.” (2011: 69). This might also be the reason why the novel was especially engaging for young readers as its 2009 Orange Prize Youth Panel Award confirms (2011: 69; Annex 7.1). Evaristo shows a similar didactic aim in her subsequent novel *Hello Mum* (2010), where she stresses contemporary familiar tensions which result from changing social pressures as well as current youth and motherhood issues, which, as I will show later, are repeatedly present in these chapters.

plantation slavery cannot be understood without the enslaver's role. This becomes clear when she describes the various punishments given to runaways:

Pepper, salt and lime juice rubbed into whip cuts meant getting off lightly. [...] Having your nose sliced off meant you didn't. [...] One time he [Massa Nonso] forced a runaway to lie down and another to shit in her mouth. Two men forced it open, and when the deed was done, clamped it shut. [...] No kidding. [...] I had seen men castrated and women lose a breast. I had seen limbs removed, skin scalded, cheeks branded. (*BR*: 211-212)

These lines from "In My Master's House" particularly highlight Massa Nonso's cruelty. Being Bwana's first son, his power on the plantation has no limits as the overwhelming wealth and luxuriance of his house seems to suggest (*BR*: 229-230). But, at the same time and in spite of his privileged position, Evaristo also stresses his weakness, psychological vulnerability and ambivalence. Moreover, her gaze on the master's position has a feminist critical dimension. Similarly to what she did with Bwana, she informs the reader that Nonso's infancy was overshadowed by his younger brother Bamwoze, much more endeared to his parents. Likewise, Nonso seems to shape his life his father's shadow of without success. In consequence, Nonso develops an insensitive and wicked character displaying insecurity about his role as master and son. In this way, Evaristo questions not only the almighty power of the master but also draws attention to the ambivalent figure of the father in a plantation system that is also articulated through patriarchy. This becomes particularly clear in Bwana's spiteful and reproachful letters (*BR*: 220-224) to his son Nonso in which he criticizes and doubts his ability to manage "Home Sweet Home". Interestingly, the result is that Bwana's incompetent son will finally act as the catalyst that sets off Doris's last escape.

As I have repeatedly noted, the shattered representation of Bwana's and Nonso's subjectivity and masculinity can be seen as symptomatic for the profound ambivalence

of the dominant discourse of slavery. Evaristo stresses the confluence of discourses of civilized Enlightenment and simultaneous racialized conceptions and practices as Gilroy denounces in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Between Camps* (2004). In this sense, the coexistence or synchronicity of these opposing forces is also visible at a linguistic level. As the following passage shows, Evaristo resolutely juxtaposes the descriptions of the slave's hard work and the obscenely violent punishments they receive with the lush portray of the Caribbean environment:

Hanging heliconia sprouted freely everywhere, their purple, red and golden flowers shooting sideways out of long stems like small fishes with parrots' beaks. [...] The elegant bird-of-paradise plant grew four feet tall, topped with an imperious orange crest. [...] Aware that for the first time the pain in my back seemed to have completely disappeared, I felt brave enough to reach behind and actually touch it, running cautious fingers across its sensitive grooves and cavities. [...] Not an inch remained of the silky-smooth skin of which I had once been so proud. [...] It was ugly [...] And so was I. (BR: 188)

Similarly to "Book Two", the author uses the setting as a metaphorical device in order to illustrate the ambiguity of fixed and normative representations. As the passage proves, Doris's own body reflects this ambiguity. In this way, Evaristo's metaphors clearly convey feminist concerns as formulated by Braidotti (2008; 2011), who compares the historical process of long-established habits of thought and the "hierarchy of values governed by binary oppositions" (2011: 17) with a "progressive accumulation of toxins" (2011: 17) that poisons the concept of difference becoming equivalent to inferiority (2011: 17). In fact, Evaristo transposes this same idea to her descriptions of the botanical world that surrounds Doris's at the plantation: "The flowers never failed to take my breath away, and sipping their milky sap could do just that, slowing down a heartbeat until it came to a final, irreversible stop. [...] *Toxic* —the story of the islands" (BR: 210, my emphasis). Thus, Evaristo's combination of images draws a line that, at a first glance, positions slaves and enslavers in opposing zones. However, these

oppositions are simultaneously blurred by the tensions and complexities that occur not only between those different spaces but also within their own zones. As the following section highlights, these internal tensions will ultimately facilitate slaves' resistance and opposition.

5.2. Enacting female solidarity: "Even in hell there was such love"

While one dimension of "Book Three" mainly revolves around the depiction of Doris's life on Bwana's sugar cane plantation and her living with an alterity that is poisoned with successive layers of negatively charged difference, another focuses on Doris's psychological strength and will to contest this dominant discourse:

My heart leaped from my chest. [...] What had I done to deserve this? [...] I decided that as soon as I found a way, I would be gone. Somewhere. Somehow. Someday. Soon. [...] This time I'd slit my throat before capture. [...] At that thought, I picked up my heart, cupped it between my hands and placed it back behind my ribs, where it belonged. (*BR*: 174)

This metaphor not only stresses Doris's stamina and resilience but also foreshows that she will not allow the enslavers to be the masters of her fate. Despite the island's toxicity or the master's almighty law, Doris survives and finally manages to escape. In fact, the emphasis on women's strength in general becomes symptomatic in these last chapters and one of the central topics of the novel. This strength goes hand in hand with the characterisation of the enslaved population as individuals. Notwithstanding the enslaver's persistent generalising discourse, Doris identifies the main slave characters —King Shaka,¹⁷ Ye Memé,¹⁸ Ma Marjani and Miss Iffi, that is,

¹⁷As his name suggests, King Shaka occupies the position of a leading house slave. He actually functions as Home sweet Home's king as he dominates and controls the estate. Opposed to Nonso's ineptitude, he will also play a leading role in Doris's escape.

her sister Sharon— as distinctive personalities with their strengths and flaws. Through Doris’s account of her arrival and her process of adaption to her new environment, comes the realisation of the female slaves’ endurance and their ability to form a real community in the plantation. In particular, daily survival depends on the women’s skills to establish their own networks as Doris points out when recognising that she survives thanks to the solidary help of another female slave: “Ye Memé had saved my life” (*BR*: 181). With this recognition, Evaristo shifts the reader’s focus towards solidarity as a central theme opening up yet another perspective of the process of resistance and contestation and ultimately discarding the idea of slaves as victims: “No one forced Ye Memé to take me on as house guest, Lord knows I gave nothing back in return, at first. No one told her to protect me from the advances of men who saw me as fresh meat, to raise her sizeable fists to ward off those for whom *No* spelt *Yes*” (*BR*: 185). Evaristo thus blends the idea of female solidarity alongside that of women’s self-sufficiency.

As a matter of fact, Ye Memé becomes one of the most important slave characters of the novel. She not only saves Doris’s life by teaching her to deal with the plantation’s typical hard work, but also takes her under her wings as a newcomer. It is Ye Memé who introduces Doris into the new slave community with its own principles and rules which she eventually manages to contest. These women-centered networks of solidarity and mutual care, represented by Ye Memé and her other female friends, provide distinctive traits to their community and grant Doris’s life far more cohesion than her previous experiences in Londolo. Beyond that, these characters stand for those female Caribbean slaves that have successfully lived and survived the plantation system

¹⁸Ma Marjani, Ye Memé’s best friend, is one of the leading females among the plantation slaves. She supports Ye Memé raising her son Dingiswayo.

for generations and which are also architects of the common space of the Black Atlantic.

This idea is particularly reflected in their use of language. All the enslaved inhabitants of “Home Sweet Home” speak there creole language of the West Japanese islands. Evaristo conveys thus the Caribbean creole phonetically displaying its particularities with great mastery and interconnecting her whyte slaves with the hybrid culture of the Caribbean. Doris uses the term “creole” to refer to the “language of the islands, which had evolved from the various tongues of the people who inhabited it” (BR: 177). Since this creole alludes to both the slave history of the Caribbean and the resulting syncretism and creolisation of the various slave cultures that coexist, I suggest that it works as another example of the transposition of alterity. The hybrid character of the creole tongue functions in itself as a mechanism of resistance and therefore as a sign of positive alterity, contributing to an affirmative identity for the slaves.

In the same line, Evaristo combines and merges several true signifiers into Ye Memé’s character and physique. Although she represents a typical Caribbean female slave, she is simultaneously portrayed as “a big-boned, sloe-eyed Viking beauty with proud sculptured cheekbones which held her skin smooth and taut” (BR: 180). In this way, Ye Memé stands for the fusion of disparate traits and, thus, for hybridity. For instance, she combines Viking and Ambossan physical features: “Her tanned skin had been oiled, gaily painted wooden bangles ran up her arms, big, brass discs were inserted into the flesh of her earlobes and a chicken bone was shot through her nose. Honestly, the woman was *such* a glamazon” (BR: 189). Additionally, Ye Memé is also projected as a “single working mother raising five children in a plantation society where most children grew up in broken homes” (BR: 183). This can be considered as another

example of Evaristo's juxtaposition and synchronization of her protagonists' features with current debates on gender and masculinity to which I will return later. Ye Memé's character stands thus in herself for a gender specific transposition that confers alterity both positive and contesting elements.

Evaristo's transposition of alterity is also reflected on a broader level in her hybrid portrayal of the slave's plantation society. The slaves' oppressed society combines cultural traits with the remnants of their own diverse European cultures that have survived enslavement. In the chapter "A Balm in Gilead", those multiple cultural axes are highlighted in the slaves' hidden worship of their own God, in a way that illustrates how colonial power is refused, reinterpreted and subjected to hybridization:

Now back at the shrine, Father O'Reilly suddenly ceased his preachifying, turned his back on the congregation, dipped into a basket, draped himself in a white cassock with a large red and gold cross appliquéd onto the front, and strung a rosary of red coral beads from his neck. [...] The high priest started to recite a prayer which the congregation knew off by heart. His voice quieter, manner serene. [...] In de name of de Fadder an de Son an de Holee Gost. [...] After all these years I found myself praying in a public place of worship to my own God. [...] Then the drums started up again, the doors were opened and the congregation resumed its noisy convulsions. (BR: 201-202)

This idea respectively engages with Bhabha's and Hall's concepts of hybridity and cultural identity discussed in chapter one —especially the *Présence Africaine* and the *Présence Européenne*, mentioned by Stuart Hall (1993: 400-401)— which exemplify not only the process of assimilations and syncretisms but also their inherent dialogue of power and resistance.

In the same line and as suggested by the chapter's title "A Balm in Gilead" — that stands for "Balm of Gilead", medicinal balm and biblical symbol for divine remedy—, Evaristo satirically reworks these processes of creolisation and hybridization.

Similarly to what Bwana does when discussing the religious practices of the Europeans, she allows Doris to express prejudiced opinions about the enslavers' dominant religion:

It never ceased to shock me that people believed these stories to be a true and accurate rendition of how we humans came into being. Granted, my own religion featured disconnected ribs and talking snakes but at least we began life as a *human* part, not as flipping clay statues. (*BR*: 199)

This statement is not only connected to the contemporary persistence of religious preconceptions, but hints at the fact that these hybrid spaces are not free from their own internal tensions, prejudices and relations of power. Moreover, it also seems to suggest that hybridity is not a consequence of the interaction of various essentially pure cultures due to the processes of colonization but that any community (dominant as well as dominated) is subjected to processes of hybridization which have always existed. This position is clearly related to pluralistic affirmations which understand the notion of blackness as an open signifier that seeks to celebrate complex representations of black particularity (Gilroy 1991: 5).

In addition, Evaristo portrays both women, Doris and Ye Memé, as being utterly aware of the limitations of their own religious beliefs: "I couldn't help but recall how often I'd heard my dear friend whisper through gritted teeth, 'Iz dere a Gahd on dis island, Miss Omo? Iz dere? Well, mi neva see him, mi neva heer him, an him neva help me wid nuttin' (*BR*: 202)". Again, the awareness of their limitations transposes resistance and contestation into a consciously chosen option denying, thus, their position as subordinated victims. The necessary adoption of racial impositions is only interiorised to a certain degree. As Evaristo had already observed, the slave's quarters are the location where "masks of humility were dropped and people emerged —as themselves" (*BR*: 191) reversing the effects of the colonial disavowal and estranging its

power (Bhabha 2008: 162). The conscious use that slave make of the masquerade they are forced to adopt, recurrently emerges throughout the novel and points directly at Fanon's theories on black subjectivity. Interestingly, it will reappear at the end of *Blonde Roots* with Doris's sister Sharon, who will explicitly refer to this strategy as a means of surviving as Bwana's mistress:

Wid yu, Doris, fe de furz time since I waz a-kaptcha it feel like mi git Sharon bak. I had to kill her becørze nobuddee wanted to know day gyal. Bwana call mi Iffianachukwana an dat waz who I had to be. Sharon ded. Sharon famlee ded. Sharon home ded. Sharon kuntree ded. All I had to do waz mek shure Miss Iffie stay alive. [...] *That's all we ever did.* (BR: 241)

This differentiated view on the slave's resistance is also reflected in the opposing fates of Percy and King Shaka. Percy, Doris's former feudal Lord, ends up being deported to "Home Sweet Home". Remembering his atrocities, the slave community does not support him and he starves. King Shaka, Bwana's house slave in "Home Sweet Home", after helping Doris to escape, is also forced to subsist on the goodwill of the slave's community and, contrarily to Percy, he survives successfully. The comparison between these two characters suggests that the slave community has its own system of justice and that, thanks to the slaves' solidarity they manage to neutralise and counteract the dominant system. Besides, the characters draw attention to the existence of a hierarchy among the plantation slaves. In this sense, the slave's interactions are not free from prejudices and tensions. This idea will recurrently gain in strength with the female characters of Ye Memé and Doris's sister Sharon.

Apart from highlighting the internal differences among slaves, Evaristo criticises the patriarchal values of the enslaved society. Because of this, female solidarity becomes a central issue that additionally reveals Evaristo's interest in Afro-American feminist thinking. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, claims that female slaves tend to

organize themselves through “women-centered networks” (2009: 192). More precisely, “in coping with the loneliness of not finding Black male partners, ‘wisdom, experience, and some passion’ become important weapons” (2009: 174). Likewise, she contents that “women’s centrality is characterized less by the *absence* of husbands and fathers than by the significance of women” (2009: 192). But, despite the women’s leading role in the construction of their community, the image of the dominant male seems to hold a preeminent position amongst the slave population as a whole. As Doris observes: “‘Real’ men were both loved and loathed at Home Sweet Home” (BR: 213). In this respect, Doris further explains that

women cried, fought, poisoned, eve killed over them, but when their real men let them down, they complained about having to put up with *dat bastard filandara* [...] My dearest friend Ye Memé had had more than her fair share of them. All the fathers of her children were real men. And what was she? [...] Alone. (BR: 213-214)

The enslaved women are, like single mothers nowadays, caught in-between the generally idealised image of the dominant male and their daily reality as heads of their households or kin units. In this regard, these last chapters deal with issues that relate to our own contemporary preoccupations. Women not only have to deal with a complex matrix of power axes and subordination, they also reinscribe controlling images of themselves and their mates (Hill Collins 2009: 192). Doris herself is caught between the idealised image of her former companion Frank and her new mate Qwashee, who represents a much less aggressive kind of masculinity. Interestingly, Qwashee will accompany Doris in her flight accepting her leadership. Likewise, the novel suggests that the next generation of males is equally confronted with these controlling images. Ye Memé is aware that this problem already affects her adolescent son Dingiswayo who begins to adopt the pattern of dominant male conduct: “Taking me [Doris] aside, she

whispered, ‘Wha cyan mi do? It’s de hinfluence of dose older boys. Gyal, it mek me worry so much bout mi likkle chile’” (*BR*: 208).¹⁹

The novel introduces other patriarchal pressures as, for instance, the all-surveying dominance of the master which is very often expressed through sexual abuse. Ye Memé’s reference to her rape by Master Nonso evidences of this dominance: “Men always wanted to break her” (*BR*: 192). In fact, Evaristo carefully portrays the dilemma in which enslaved women are caught, enjoying on the one hand an apparent freedom to choose their sexual mates (since marriage was forbidden for slaves) and on the other their obligation to accept the fact that their masters could freely dispose of them. Sexuality functions therefore as a means of oppression for women of either race.

But despite the reference to rape, Ye Memé is not presented as a victim. By resorting to the power of the slave’s gaze mentioned in the previous chapter, female agency and contestation are highlighted: “Some of the women chose suicide, but not her. ‘Afta, I cut mi eye at him an mek shure he see it. Mebbe he like mi spirit becorze he shift mi frum First Gang to factrey kwarta afta dat.” (*BR*: 192). This representation seems to be supported by Hill Collins’s argument that

even under slavery, to characterize interracial sex purely in terms of the victimization of Black women would be a distortion, because such depictions strip Black women of agency. Many Black women successfully resisted sexual assault while others cut bargains with their masters. More difficult to deal with, however, is the fact that even within these power differentials, genuine affection characterized some sexual relationships between Black women and White men. (2009: 176)

This last point is embodied by Sharon, renamed Iffianachukwana by Bwana. Doris’s sister is Bwana’s mistress and plays a salient role in Doris’s escape. The last

¹⁹ This issue gains relevance in Evaristo’s last novel *Hello Mum* (2010) in which she centres on the relationship between contemporary single motherhood and masculinity.

chapter of “Book Three”, “Wade in the Water”, narrates the short but meaningful reencounter of the two sisters. Although Sharon’s fate is summarised as the result of a thwarted fairy tale: “What a pity her knight in shining armour turned out to be Bwana” (*BE*: 238), she is not represented as a victim. As Doris observes, Sharon and her three sons occupy a privileged position in the slave community (*BR*: 214) which Sharon will consciously use to exercise her power and organize Doris’s escape.

At the end, Sharon’s relationship with Bwana seems to continue and her fate is left open: ““Betta go work, Doris, or Nonso git mad or madda. He iz one craze man dese days. Bwana nyot so bad. Bwana haz morals but dat Nonso jus a hanimal”” (*BR*: 240). She occupies a similarly ambivalent position to that of Bwana because his relationship with his mistress is not exempt from some kind of fondness: “Trust Iffianachukwana is as robust as ever. I do worry about her. Don’t want to lose her. Make sure she is looked after, son. Oh hush, I know, I know, your father is such an old softie” (*BR*: 222). This ambivalence also seems to include the illegitimate sons born out of his relationship with Sharon, who occupy an ambiguous position as they seem to move freely in the plantation and work as slave overseers, yet they are simultaneously feared and loathed by both slaves and Ambossans because of their mixed ancestry. As Doris observes, they are compelled to fulfil two opposing roles occupying, in the end, a “very unsettling” (*BR*: 237) position.

Thus, ambiguity once again seems to be a central concern affecting both enslavers and slaves. By comparing and overlapping their problems, the novel indicates that their positions are never clearly lined out. Moreover, in line with Bhabha’s notion of the Third Space, this recognition interestingly opens the possibility of new strategies of resistance and contestation. The fluid female bonds of care and solidarity mentioned

before are equally prone to evolve in these ambivalent spaces. This point is reasserted when Doris secretly starts to teach Ye Memé's children to read and write, an act that indicates on the one hand that the slave's conscious solidarity is not a one-way process and on the other that female bonds of caring promote resistance and opposition:

It would be a rebellious act. The masters didn't want literate slaves. Yet I had been taught by Little Miracle, and not only got away with it, but it had been to my advantage. [...] Of course I would teach Yao and maybe, some day, it might be to his too. [...] In any case how could I refuse? [...] It was payback time. [...] I was glad to earn my keep. (BR: 196).

Resistance and contestation are thus, not only expressed through hybridity but also through solidarity. Both aspects form a binomial that becomes especially meaningful as regards kinship and motherhood. When considering the female slaves' awareness of their limitations and the double restraint imposed on women Ye Memé, for instance, observes: "Biggez problem fe us iz our gyal-chiles. Soon as dey ole enuf, dey forced a-do nastee-nastee tings wid de massas. Yu can imagin. We try to protect our gyal-chile. Truth is, we cyant" (BR: 192). Regarding her mulatto son Ndewelee, Sharon equally claims: "Yu tink say mi bwoys hav-a choice? What choice? Dem slaves too, like all a-we" (BR: 242). In spite of their different positions within the slave society, both women share the same preoccupations and in order to survive and protect their children, their only option is to help each other.

Establishing once more a dialogue with Morrison's *Beloved*, Evaristo reflects on motherhood in a society in which mothering a child is nearly impossible or, at least, very difficult. She draws attention to the fact that the slaves actually had to redefine motherhood, as Hill Collins argues:

vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers –women who assist bloodmothers by sharing

mothering responsibilities- traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (2009: 192)

This idea is clearly transposed into Doris's world. For instance, Ye Memé shared her motherhood with Ma Marjani who "was raising Ye Memé's son Dingiswayo as her own" (*BR*: 204). For Doris, this form of fictive kinship also means a newly experienced motherhood when she repeatedly talks of Ye Memé's children as her own: "My children: Yao, Inaani, Akiki, Cabion and Lolli slept each night sprawled out around me and their mother" (*BR*: 209). This would relate to Hill Collins' claims that

[t]he resilience of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of family have been continually reworked to help African-Americans as a collectivity cope with and resist oppression. (2009: 197)

Analogously, Braidotti relates Hill Collins' theory to African humanism or "Ubuntu"²⁰ (2008: 56), in the understanding that this tradition as a political culture of resistance that is not only supported by a dialogical system but is also informed by the notion of care as a collective responsibility for one's community (2008: 56). She claims that this system can, therefore, be regarded as an alternative to Western humanism, which, as I have argued before, has been related to colonial conquest and exploitation on the other (2008: 56).

This viewpoint is clearly reflected in the importance Evaristo concedes to the different modalities of motherhood. The author not only portrays their significance in the daily struggle to survive but also in the excelling role they finally play in Doris's escape. It is mainly due to the organisation and confluence of these four mothers —

²⁰Ubuntu is a Zulu word and is considered as representative of the spiritual foundation of African societies. It is also understood as a unifying vision or worldview that articulates a basic respect and compassion for others (Shutte, 1993:46).

Sharon and Ye Memé as “bloodmothers” (Hill Collins 2009: 192) and Ma Marjani and Doris as “othermothers” (Hill Collins 2009: 192)— that their sons, threatened by Nonso’s intention of selling them, manage to escape too. Evaristo’s feminist transposition is very meaningful since the four mothers end in a position of power, clearly contesting their enslavers. Beyond that, the novel seems to regard motherhood as symbol of power which empowers and politicises women. Interestingly, Hill Collins thinks in this regard that “othermothers” and other forms of fictive kinship could provide a foundation for conceptualizing contemporary Black women’s political activism (2009: 205). She even claims “the need either to refashion these networks or develop some other way of supporting Black children nowadays” (2009: 198). Thus, the novel’s display of alternative forms of motherhood is still relevant to contemporary society. In the same line, Braidotti confirms this position as she affirms: “Kinship systems and social bonding, like flexible citizenship, can be rethought differently and differentially, moving away from the blood, earth, and origin of the classical social contract” (2011: 53).

Consequently, Doris’s escape is transposed into an essentially female and strategically organised “milatree operashun” (*BR*: 242). It is Sharon who, wishing a life in freedom for his son Ndewele, organises Doris’s flight. Being very close to King Shaka, they form an alliance that has already allowed other slaves to escape. Doris takes advantage of Nonso’s ineptitude in managing Bwana’s plantation, and employs her literacy to outwit him. She manipulates his accounts to make them appear as gambling debts which, in his father’s eyes, will disgrace and humiliate him. In the confusion created by Bwana’s arrival to the plantation and the subsequent feast they organise to receive him, Ye Memé and Ma Marjani help Doris to escape. In this regard, she not

only obtains assistance from within the slave community, she is also ironically aided by her own master's family. The confluence of the plantation members' disparate interests makes Doris's flight possible serving as evidence of what Braidotti's calls the "zigzagging interconnections between discursive communities" (2008: 7). Evaristo, thus, represents a Third Space in which difference is transposed into something less toxic if not outright affirmative.

In a sense, the slaves' solidarity and their newly shaped opposition to the system are transformed into open contestation that works toward the creation of new alternatives (Braidotti 2011: 286). Doris's last challenging gaze at the enslaver is an example of this alternative power:

The chink in his armour encouraged me to look up at him with the kind of kamikaze boldness I'd last displayed when I'd had my final face-off with Little Miracle. While appearing to sing the welcoming song, I mouthed something so vile that even if Bwana couldn't lip-read, he'd still get the message. [...] It worked. He looked embarrassed. Take that, bastard! (BR: 252)

What is more, Doris's bondage is transposed into an affirmative alterity as she transforms the loss of her friends into an acknowledgement of her newly gained leadership: "I expected Ndwele or Qwashee to take control, then realised it was I who should assume leadership. [...] I had made this happen, for myself, for the boys, for the friends I'd left behind. [...] I felt so calm, so level-headed, so powerful" (BR: 257). As a result, an invigorated Doris leads her four friends (Yao, Dingiswayo, Ndewelee and Quashee) to the Maroon Camp in Freedom Country. Doris's empowerment is the final sign of the process of transposition paraphrasing Braidotti's nomadic project, it can be claimed that "'they' are in *this* together" (2011: 295), reformulating their future. It seems that the reader finally witnesses Doris's great dream of freedom being fulfilled.

However, the novel does not end with Doris's escape. Evaristo adds a brief "Postscript" outlining the fate of the main characters and providing a conclusion and closure to the novel. As my own conclusion will show, this "Postscript", in a "sort of trip through chrono-topia" (Braidotti 2008: 140) will transpose the slaves' fate into our contemporary times.



6. YINKA SHONIBARE, *THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS (ASIA)* (2008)

6. Conclusion: Transposing the “colour line”

In this dissertation I have attempted to answer the question raised in the introduction whether *Blonde Roots* manages to narrate beyond “the colour line”. As Stuart Hall claims “representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (1997: 226). My analysis has hopefully contributed to show that *Blonde Roots* addresses racial and cultural stereotypes which still operate in our society in an unconventional way. Evaristo portrays a racialized world where difference has become the equivalent of inferiority, but, at the same time, casts in bold relief the transposition of this negative charge.

It can be argued that *Blonde Roots* depicts two realms of representation. One can be explained through more classic theories of representation and mainly involves the reversal of conventional stereotypes such as the black-white inversion. Evaristo is equally interested in questioning the stereotypes related to the ideals of beauty and masculinity which are still present in our patriarchal societies. Additionally, the novel also stresses those stereotyping processes related to cultural behaviours, beliefs and religious assumptions sustained by both sides of the colour line: the enslaver and the enslaved. As I have shown, these shifts are narratively expressed through juxtapositions, combinations and fusions of diachronic and synchronic images that transcend, as McLeod suggests, the classical idea of hybridity and appear to be closely related to the notion of chronotope (2011: 172-173). The works of Yinka Shonibare which I have chosen to open the different chapters have visually illustrated these simultaneous

juxtapositions of apparently contradictory signifiers subverting conventional representations and highlighting new creative meanings.

Evaristo's chronotopes also entail a powerful and specifically feminist second dimension linked to Braidotti's understanding of transposition. *Blonde Roots* merges past and present adopting, in Braidotti's words, "a feminist critical position [that] assumes the dislocation of the linearity of time and hence the necessity to inhabit different and even potentially contradictory time zones at the same time: a sort of trip through chrono-topia" (2008: 140). Because of this, Doris's critical position demonstrates the slave's contestation offering an alternative perspective on the so called "double colonisation" of women. This feminist realm is introduced through several themes. Firstly, Evaristo sets up, as already noted by Burkitt (2011), a metafictional dialogue with black slave narratives —such as Haley's and Morrison's—but also with certain white master narratives as, for example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This intertextual dialogue highlights the transposition of essentialist ideas on racial purity and alterity. Moreover, as Braidotti claims, difference should not necessarily to be understood as lack or inferiority. By opening her novel with Nietzsche's well known claim that "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth", she reminds us that power relations are not symptomatic of binary oppositions but of discursive relations.

A second theme is Evaristo's recurrent motif of the "Oppositional Gaze" which carries a similar association. Despite her enslavement, Doris's female gaze is an ironic and multi-faceted transposition of Fanon's interpellation "Look, a Negro!" (2008: 83) and paradigmatic of what I call a gender specific transposition through which conventional ideas on victimhood and power relations are subverted. Another

expression of this reformulation of female power and contestation is the recurring theme of solidarity. Echoing the assumption that alterity includes multiple axes of differentiation, the novel represents the theme of solidarity through the motifs of friendship and motherhood. Solidarity recurs throughout the novel acquiring new connotations with each repetition. The motif of motherhood is not exclusively grounded on blood relations as Afro-American slave's heritage has evinced (Hill Collins 2009); it is Doris's function as "othermother" (Hill Collins 2009: 192) what ultimately endows her with the power to escape and survive.

However, *Blonde Roots* is not naively idealistic. The text depicts a patriarchal world where patterns of marginalization and exclusion of racialized and genderized others remain operative. These patterns are expressed through the complicity between capitalist economic power, and Enlightenment's ideas on freedom in which the idea of racial difference is ultimately rooted. Evaristo questions the tenets of these ideological and economic systems, and particularly engages in the role of history as a master narrative. To accomplish such critique, she dismantles the patriarchal narrative form of the fairy tale thwarting its conventional happy ending, in order to highlight the complex interaction of colour and culture lines affecting her female protagonists.

A last example of Evaristo's reworking of the fairy tale's tradition is the novel's "Postscript" (BR: 259). Despite its apparently happy ending, the reader's expectations are once more subverted. Resembling the chorus in a classical tragedy, Doris, in an unsettling detached and factual tone, outlines the fate of the novel's main characters. In brief paragraphs, the reader learns that although Doris and her friends safely arrived in the "Maroon Camp", freedom is not exempt from the structural consequences of slavery. Neither Sharon's son Ndeweke —because of his mixed race— nor Doris's

companion Quashee —as a result of his weak character— are accepted among the fugitive slaves. Likewise, Dingiswayo's trajectory seems to follow a similar path as he fought without success against slavery throughout his life. Only literate Yao and his descendants face a more positive future for he "grew up a kind man, a thinking man, a free man" (*BR*: 260).

At "Home Sweet Home", Doris's enslaved female friends had to face an even darker and more pessimistic future. While the enslavers' lives remain comparatively sheltered between the coordinates of racial discourse and patriarchy, slaves' survival continues to depend on resilience and physical strength. Doris's sister Sharon dies shortly after her escape and Ye Memé is subjected to the most abominable punishments as her tongue is cut off. Representing the generations of silenced slaves' yet to be born, Ye Memé's speechlessness constitutes a powerful counterpoint to Doris's resolute voice. Despite her newly acquired freedom, Doris's yearnings for a family remain unfulfilled. If she kept any hope regarding her own children, this is definitely shattered for their fate remains unknown (*BR*: 260).

Finally, in the last paragraphs, Doris's voice gives way to an omniscient narrator who closes the different narrative threads and confers a sense of circularity to the novel, by invoking for the last time "the red gingers, purple bougainvillea and the golden heliconia" (*BR*: 261) of the West Japanese Islands which remain nevertheless disturbing. This final reminder of the island's accumulated historical toxins of difference reinforces following reminder to contemporary descendants of slavery:

In the twenty-first century, Bwana's descendants still own the sugar estate and are among the grandest and wealthiest families in the United Kingdom of Great Ambossa, where they all reside. [...] The cane workers, many of whom are descended from the original slaves, are paid. (*BR*: 261)

This explicit reference to the twenty-first century implies a last transposition, as the realities of transatlantic slavery become simultaneously part of the past and integral to understand the present. With the novel's last words, Evaristo seems to suggest that slavery might have been abolished, but racism and other forms of colonial domination and slavery still linger in contemporary society (Annex 7.1). Concurring with Shonibare's series of "The sleep of reason produces monsters" (2008), *Blonde Roots* synchronizes Britain's historical reality with our own contemporary debates on racism and the unachieved ideals of the Enlightenment.

Beyond that, *Blonde Roots* unsettles slavery as an essentially black experience, pointing at the profound implications of slavery for the former slave trading white population. This new position certainly displaces the alleged "burden of representation" (Mercer 1990) of Black British artists, that is, the assumption that the first Black British artists were obliged to re-negotiate cultural belongings and national identity of specifically black peoples carrying in this sense a burden which recent texts try to redefine (Oyedeji 2009, 119-134). As a matter of fact, Evaristo re-negotiates new Black British representations in what John McLeod has recently explained as a new significant shift in contemporary black British writing, one "in which the British nation is re-imagined *in toto*, to say, in an international frame and not primarily or exclusively for black Britons" (2010: 50).

In striving to transpose the emotional world of slaves and their *hidden* historical legacy into our times (Annex 7.1, my emphasis), Evaristo is trying "to win people round so that they get to see things from a particular point of view" (Annex 7.1). She does not attempt to hide or dwell on the slaves' sufferings. Emphasizing their diasporic experiences, she works through negative instances in order to transform them through multiple forms of belonging and complex alliances (Braidotti 2011: 285-288). In fact,

by formulating new figurations, that is, transpositions, she is addressing both readerships: black and white, proving Braidotti's project: "'we' are in *this* together" (2011: 294). *Blonde Roots* transpositions reformulate the collective "we" of *this* world. In the light of her recently published novel *Mr. Loverman* (2013), it will be interesting to disclose the extent to which Evaristo proceeds to explore these new figurations.

7. ANNEXES

7. 1. Interview with Bernardine Evaristo, Palma de Mallorca, April 2011.

I would like to start thanking you for giving me this opportunity to interview you. My first question is what gave you the impulse to write a novel about slavery in Britain?

I wanted to write about the Transatlantic Slave Trade as it related to the British involvement. Britain was at one point the world's major slave trading nation and a lot of the British economy, especially the ports towns of London, Liverpool and Bristol, were build up into great cities on the proceed of the slave trade. Yet, at the same time, it is a history that is not fully acknowledged in Britain. We are very aware of the American history; one example of this is that, until the last two years or so, slavery was taught in history at school in Britain, but it was the American slave trade, not the British slave trade that was taught. And that is just absurd, isn't it?

The British slave trade is not acknowledged, it has not really been explored through all the media in the same way in which slavery is explored in America. Almost every aspect of that history has been explored through all the different media; there have been many books, fiction, poetry, history, nonfiction, many films, radio programs, television documentaries, theatre plays. The British involvement in slave history does not have that, so I wanted to look at this because I thought it was important, but I wanted to do something differently with it. As a writer I like to do things differently. I see myself as very much as an outsider voice and coming out of a history of experimentation as a writer. What I wanted to do was to find a way to write about slavery so that people looked at it afresh and that is when I came upon the idea of turning it on its head and creating this world of inversion whereby Africans enslave

Europeans. And I just wanted it as way of exploring a sort of hidden history which is part of my brief as a writer. My personal brief is to explore the hidden histories, the hidden stories that are not part of the mainstream narrative and culture of Britain but are important and crucial.

In the novel, Doris, Blonde Roots's "whyte" protagonist, describes her "blak" boss Bwana as "a full-time anti-abolitionist, publishing his pro-slavery rants in his mouthpiece The Flame" (BR: 4). How did black readers react to the depiction of blacks as racist enslavers?

The thing is you only get a limited response to your work. One man, who had not actually read the book, came on one of my events and he accused me of giving white people our history of suffering and I said that is not what I am doing. I am using the reversal as a device to show what *really* happened. He stormed out of the room because he did not want to hear what I was really doing. Apart from that, I have not really had negative responses to it. I thought I would get some people saying this is a very sensitive subject; this is very dear to our hearts, how dare you to turn it into comedy? But I use satire and the whole point of satire is that you are making points through the humour. It's not just aiming to be funny for the sake of it, it is humour to expose and to criticise things that you think are wrong.

I do not hear the really negative comments that might be out there, so I am assuming it was ok with them. I do not have an ideal reader for my books because that limits how I write. But I know that some of the humour in that book is very relevant to

black people and to black women and they sometimes would get what a white reader might not get.

Doris's comments on her Ambossan enslavers, as well as on her own situation, are full of sharp observational and riotous humour. Do you think that humour, in this case satire, could be a response to racism?

Yes, I think it is a very good response to racism. I think humour is a very good response to pretty much everything. It is a very powerful tool, something that can show things up to what they really are. It's a release, it's a healing thing. After 9/11 nobody was allowed to joke about it, it was taboo. It took a few years before that too could be a source of humour and I think that is a source of healing as well. That is not to say you are trivializing it, it is just saying that you should have to be able to laugh pretty much at everything, even the worst things that happen in your life, but it might take decades.

The language of Blonde Roots mixes thought-provoking images and lyrical refrains with contemporary colloquialisms. How did young people react to the novel? Did you notice any generational differences in their reaction?

The novel won an award chosen by young people in their very late teens and it was the Orange Prize Youth Panel Award in 2009. They had the choice of all the books that were submitted for the Orange Prize that year and they chose *Blonde Roots*. That would suggest that it does strike a chord with a youthful audience. I mean, I would like to think that my writing is fresh and irreverent and very immediate, and I would imagine that young people would relate to that in a particular way. One of the editors from Puffin (the children's imprint of Penguin) had a meeting with me last year and she said I could

write for a teenager audience. I do not know if I will, but I do like the young perspective, I like writing about young people.

How would you understand these creative choices in relation to the “burden of representation” (Mercer 1990) that affects other British writers like Zadie Smith or Monica Ali and has often conditioned the critics’ response to their work?

It is a burden and it is a very complicated thing because there are not many Black British writers, even though people might think there are lots of us. People get published, and they publish one, two, three books but very few publish anymore than that. There aren’t that many Black British writers doing the work that is being done. We are in a minority in the society, we have to accept that, and we are in a minority in publishing world. Then there are expectations that what you write has to somehow represent your community, your constituency; but more than that, there is this idea that it should be a positive representation. That is incredibly limiting for the writer and for everybody, because as an artist you want personal freedom; that is the whole point of being an artist. You have chosen to follow a profession where you’re able to completely express yourself exactly as you want to. Because you are of Black, African, Asian or Caribbean descent in Britain, for example, people then will have the expectations that you should write certain things in certain ways.

Toni Morrison, for instance, is an amazing writer, but she is very critical of the Afro-American community. She writes with great love and compassion and insight. But she does not create lovely characters. They are characters capable of doing horrible things to each other. And yet, there is a feeling in the UK that we are not even allowed that freedom. As a writer, there is this kind of voice in your head sometimes sitting on your shoulder, telling you what you should or should not to do. It is something you have

to battle it all the time. Yet, I trust my own politics and my own judgement and that has to be enough for the creative process.

There are Black British writers who choose not to write Black characters. Mike Gayle, for instance, whose books I have not read, is a best-selling 'lad lit' author. From what I can tell his books are not race specific, they are not black books or show the black world. He has made a choice, probably a commercial choice, to write characters that are not about the black community and he does take some criticism for that and he is not generally embraced as a Black British writer. Monica Ali has just published a book about Princess Diana (*Untold Story* 2012), it is about her having survived the crash and living in America, it sounds ridiculous, but she has to have the right to be able to do that. But we cannot all do that because if we did, we would be back to the situation we had years ago where black lives in Britain were not being explored. So, on the one hand, I think it is really important to have freedom, on the other hand, I also think it is important that at least some of us are exploring black experiences, however we do it. In *Blonde Roots* there are white characters with a black experience!

One of the strengths of the novel is that it questions stereotypes by reversing them; for instance, Doris "had image issues" and repeats "an uplifting mantra" every morning: "I may be fair and flaxen. I may have slim nostrils and slender lips. I may have oil-rich hair and a non-rotund bottom. [...] Yes, I may be whyte. But I am whyte and I am beautiful!" (BR: 32). In this way you are commenting on topics that are still a problem in our societies and you do so in a way that make these topics very much alive?

Yes, they are very alive and that is why they are in the book. I think when you have racial minorities (I am aware that race is a contested word) in a society where there is not complete integration, you can get people making judgements about the minority based on stereotypes on the past. I think that is fact, and I think that is what we are living with, a residue of that. For example, I am integrated myself, because I am mixed race, but then there are quite a lot of black people, who do not live in the same situation. My book *Hello Mum* (2010), for instance, is about a teenage boy, called Jerome, who is fourteen, lives in a Council Estate, goes to a predominantly black school with mainly white teachers, and does not really mix with white people apart from those who represent some kind of authority. That work is a true reflexion on what life is like for quite a few black children growing up in Britain today. They are not growing up in ghettos like in America because we don't have ghettos, but we do have communities that are more isolated.

It is also the whole racist thing of people wanting to put other people into boxes. They want to feel that they can label people (usually with some derogative term) so then they can know what they are dealing with. Some stereotypes are based on truth. Young black boys in particular are getting into a lot of trouble with each other in Britain. There is a whole gang culture, knife culture; young teenage boys killing each other. If you are living in the countryside in a white community, you only need to read about that once or twice to assume that all young black boys are involved in this culture which of course is not the truth.

There is also another issue about black families not supporting their children. Well, that is a generalization, but there are a lot of single black women raising their children alone. That is another stereotype we are dealing with. And then you have all

this myth of black being ugly. It is not as bad as it used to be because we have moved now to a position in which mixed race is attractive, whereas years the ideal of beauty for most black people was not mixed race. They even make themselves look whiter through hair, makeup and everything else. Look at Naomi Campbell, there was a period she had green eyes, and makeup her face that made her nose look straighter. All this perpetuates the myths of what is beautiful, what is attractive; just like the stereotypes of black men involved in crime, unemployed, lazy, muggers, dangerous beings.

When I was researching for *Hello Mum*, I was talking to young teenagers, boys mainly, living in the inner cities, some of whom had been involved in gangs and knew all about them. When I was talking to them, I thought of when I was growing up in the seventies when, black children and especially boys were victimized. Talking to these boys felt like I was back in the seventies, except their fear was towards each other; they didn't feel part of the society, they felt victimized by it and they said to me things like "It's safer to leave London than to go from one zone to another" because they had these area codes and if you live in Brixton you are not supposed to go to Hackney because you have no right to be there. So all this is still going on and I feel we are not really dealing with it.

In a way, you are dealing with it through your characters. Doris as a slave is clearly the victim of atrocious suffering, but she is also a very strong character who manages to bravely resist the system.

I did not want to create a victim and I am afraid that I am a little bit guilty of that in all my books. No matter the situation of my characters, they personally have a strength; to

me that makes them interesting as a character. With Doris, I said I did not want to write the obvious story. I am not really interested in victims. She is a victim because she is a slave, but she rises against her victim status. The same happens to Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe* (2001). Zuleika is enslaved in her marriage and in the society in which she has to live but, actually, she makes the most of it and that is what I wanted to portray. I see it as my duty to create strong interesting flawed female characters.

In the book, the plantation "Home Sweet Home" is the place where cultural practices from England and Ambossa are combined. This idea of hybridity, as defined for instance by Homi Bhabha, is also present in your previous novels. How do you understand this concept and which role does it play in your life?

I have never read Homi Bhabha but I am familiar with the term "hybridity". I think the whole source of hybridity in my work is my own background, which is a hybrid background. It is a Catholic but also a socialist background. It is white, English, and also African. I grew up with a very dominant father, and a very Catholic mother. As a writer I am very much about bringing those polarities together, which is why I do what I do, the way I do it. When I wrote *The Emperor's Babe*, I set a Black character in classical British history and debunk the myth that Britain was historically white until the 20th century. It was not. I did something similar with *Soul Tourists* (2005); I have a deep discomfort with European history so I introduced a series of characters of colour coming into Europe, from different places in the world, going back 2500 years to Hannibal. Then with *Blonde Roots*, I turned everything inside out and I gave white people the black experience as a device. Interestingly not with *Hello Mum*, it is set in 2009 and is just giving voice to a fourteen year old boy who lacks a voice in our society.

Lara (2009) is the ultimate hybrid novel. It is Nigeria, Brazil, England, Germany, Ireland, it is mixed race and it is saying that our lives are totally interconnected genetically, culturally we are not apart from each other, we are all a part of one thing and that is one of the big things I want to explore.

As far as my own life, through my creative practice and as a writer who has written so many books and has a certain status, I am an advocate of poets of colour who are not getting published in Britain. Somebody looking at my career might see me now as an established writer, because of being published, because of some of the awards I judge, because I have a MBE. I see myself as an outsider voice, for all the reasons you can imagine, because of my background, and my class as well. I don't come from a rich privileged background. In Britain, if you have an "Oxbridge" education, lots of doors are open to you. I am not somebody that endorses the establishment, I think I am somebody who tries to change the establishment.

This wish to change the rules and the establishment reminds me of the figure of Ye Memé in Blonde Roots; she becomes a very important character for Doris. Doris learns from her that resistance and solidarity go hand in hand. Would you say that this kind of solidarity and empathy are useful strategies to subvert (patriarchal) power? Would you identify that as a typical strategy for the women in the Caribbean Islands, which is the location you recreate in the novel?

Well, I do not really want to speak for Caribbean women because I am not one, but I know lots of Caribbean women, and talking from my experience with, I would say, yes, definitely. Caribbean women had to lean on each other, they had to support each other

for generations and they continue to do this. But the other issue of course is what I said about absent men, men not being present raising their children. It is the women who are raising sons. Maybe in part because their fathers being absent, maybe because of the way women raise them, sons are brought up in such a way that they are not being the fathers they will need to be in the future. Sometimes when you encounter older Caribbean women, you cannot get through to them, they are behind a fortress. This is because of their experience of migration and their reliance on the Caribbean community, which is mainly formed by female friends and relatives; that community has become their fortress and I have personally experienced not a lot of willingness to open up to other people.

Before I met my husband David, I had an American Black boyfriend, who was originally Jamaican British; he was my boyfriend for a while and one of the things I noticed when I met David, who is white English, was that he was not wearing the mask of self-protection that Black men wear in our society. He did not feel the need to, which meant he could be himself. Sometimes that mask of self-protection manifests itself as a macho behaviour or macho swagger, and he didn't have that, he didn't need that. He is also very middle class and even though he looks at things through my eyes, he is part of the mainstream, the establishment. He does not need to protect himself.

In fact the masculine characteristics attached to the figure of Bwana, the main male character of Blonde Roots, relate very much to what you are saying. Some of them are easy to identify in male chauvinist behaviour nowadays. These features are also bequeathed to his sons. To me there is a relationship between capitalism and masculinity.

What I was trying to do with Bwana was thinking of him actually as a Nigerian man. In my head, the Ambossans are Nigerians because I am very familiar with them. The Nigerian people are very powerful people, they tend to have a very bad reputation internationally and that is partly because a lot of them are extremely resourceful and very highly educated but the system in Nigeria is so corrupt that they had to find imaginative ways of surviving. Nigerian masculinity is very powerful. I would say even more powerful than that of Jamaicans. There is a saying that the Gambians knock on the door, the Ghanaians open the door and the Nigerians kick it down. That says something about the kind of people they are. But a rich Nigerian man, like Bwana, has a certain way of being which is not necessarily how a rich European man would be. That is how I saw Bwana, as a character who has almost complete magnificence, has complete power and he has his spittoon and when he spits somebody is waiting with the thing and it is something that is deep inside him; he is a man of wealth and status and everybody else is beneath him. Although when he speaks he is like a British slave trader, his persona is very much that of a Nigerian chief.

His character is also perfect to get an insight into the mercilessness of the slave trade.

It really was, but, at the same time, one of the things I always think about is that there are slaves in the world today, wage slaves. These clothes we are buying everyday are made in some sweatshop which probably has these two or three year old children in terrible conditions working in some kind of servitude. Apart from slavery I have read about this, I might talk about this occasionally, yet I do nothing about it.

The transatlantic slavery was probably the worst kind, but if we are to put ourselves into that situation today what would we do individually? Some of us might actually be involved in slave trading, some of us might go work on the plantation, some of us might own plantations for the money and some of us would reap the benefits in our countries, knowing what goes on, but would choose not to do anything about it. There were and still are different degrees of involvement.

I also love the novel's "Postscript", where you blend past and present, imagination and reality and you reveal the fate of the different characters. Whereas Doris will never find her three lost children, Yao, Ye Memé's son, "grew[s] up a kind man, a thinking man, a free man" (BR: 260). In this way, you are offering both moderately hopeful and very unhappy endings.

That is my way of finishing story. I wanted to imagine what happened afterwards, but knowing I could not do it in the book. I remember really enjoying writing it because for me it was a sort of closure of the book and I know it is quite sad, isn't it?

Yes, there is a sense of unsettlement about some of the slaves' fate. I found it very brave...

It is mixed, I do not really do happy endings, some of the characters get what they deserve; some of them do not, some of them survive and some of them do not...

Would you say the creation of alternative worlds through literature constitutes a political statement?

It is political because I am not writing about a middle aged couple going through a divorce and the crisis that involves. I am writing something that is challenging, provocative, maybe confrontational, that has to do with racism, slavery, our prejudices and our preconceptions and that is a very political thing to do, I think. That is the way in which I am interested in using the imagination. All my books are in some way a provocation, whether people see it or not, *The Emperor's Babe* was a provocation: it was saying black people were in Britain 1800 years before. The alternative universe I created was to bring that story alive in a way that it felt contemporary and historical; I did not just play around with anachronism for the hell of it. The aim was to bring this story alive, to bring this character alive and to make it very present in our society because when we read history books we are always looking back at what was and there is a big gap between what was and what we are. As human beings we have not evolved that much in 2000 years, we have got the same emotional world, even though how we live has changed a lot. That was the point of all this playfulness in *The Emperor's Babe* and in *Blonde Roots* and it all had its own political motivation behind.

At the beginning of Blonde Roots, you quote Nietzsche's well known statement that "All things are subject to interpretation: whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth". Some people criticise his "perspectivism" and object that if all depends of the subjective point of view and of individual interpretation, there is never any certainty.

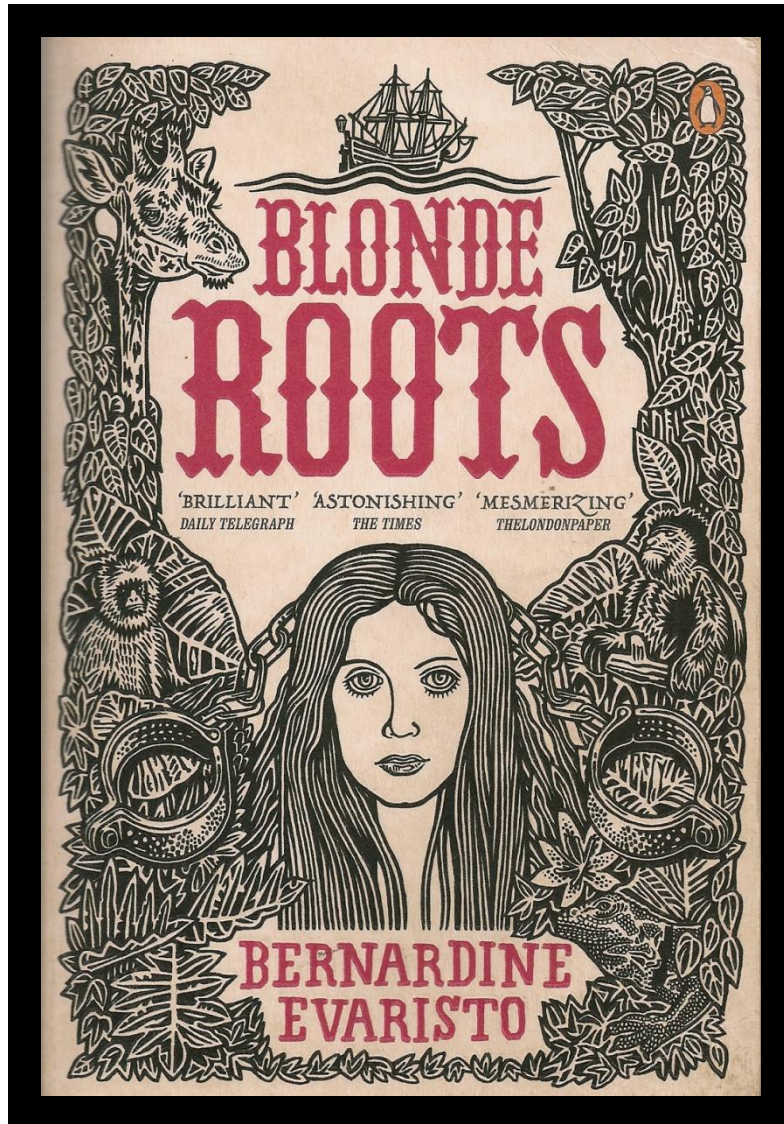
You have to accept that it is all subjective. If I lived in 200 years time and I would like to know how people lived in the first decade of the twenty-first century and then I got the *Times* newspaper and I read that as my source, it would be a very limited source, it would not be a historical record and there would be many things that would not be recorded. Therefore, it would be very true of how we live today. That is because the paper they choose is very selective in what they choose to represent and also we are selective in what we choose to remember. This is why the hidden black histories of Europe really interest me as a writer. It is a wonderful opportunity because it is ground that has not been explored very much.

My new book *Mr. Loverman* (2013) is also unexplored territory in that it deals with a Caribbean-born older man living in London who, in spite of his year-long marriage, is also secretly homosexual and lovers with his childhood friend. That excites me because there is an element of danger to it. There is a lot of homophobia everywhere, not just in the black community. With every book I write I know that there are some people who are not going to like it and I think that is a good thing, because I am taking risks. If I write a nice book and everybody is going to love it, then I know I am not really doing my job. But if I write something and I think it is going to press a few buttons, then I know I am on the right track. My novel is narrated in the first person and the protagonist is very charismatic as an individual, he is very funny, he can be very outrageous and very bad...and I am hoping that people will like him and then accept who he is. That happened with Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe*. I hope that her character could help the readers accept that she somebody like her could have lived 1800 years ago. It is like a strategy that I know I've got to win people round somehow, the act of writing is something special but it is much more than that. I have to win people round so

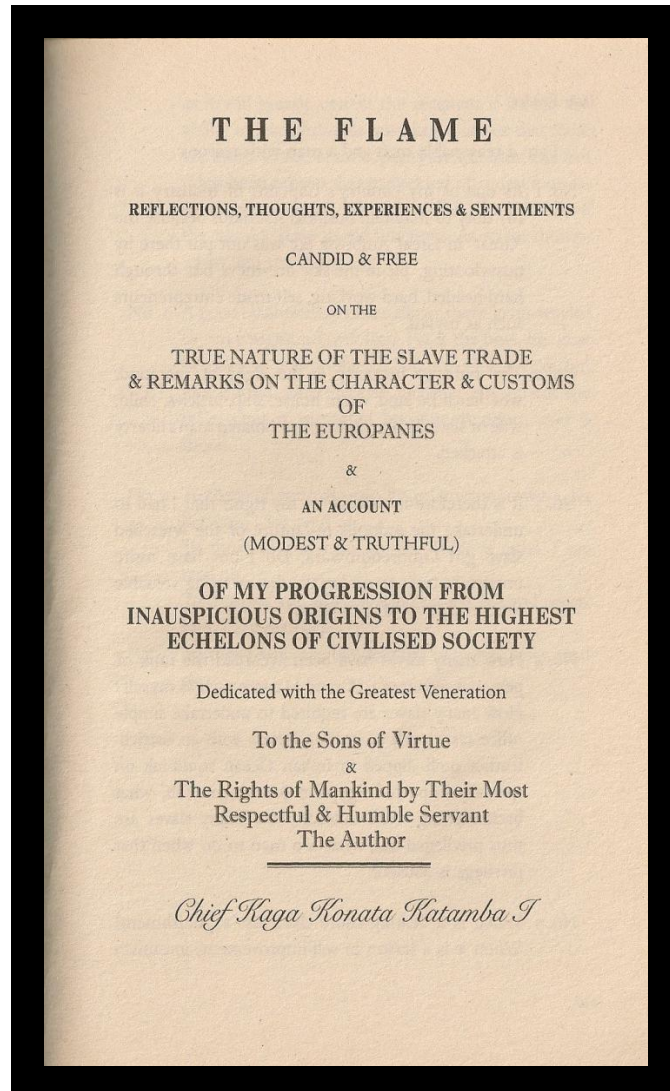
that they get to see things from a particular point of view. In my new novel this man has two lives and I want them to accept his second life through accepting him.

Thank you so very much, Bernardine.

7. 2. IMAGES FROM *BLONDE ROOTS*



FRONT PAGE



“THE FLAME”, FRONT PAGE

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INTRODUCTORY MAP

7. 3. LIST OF YINKA SHONIBARE’S WORKS

1: *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle*. ©2010 Yinka Shonibare, MBE and courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and James Cohan Gallery (New York). Photography courtesy Stephen White.

2: *Double Dutch*. ©1994, Yinka Shonibare, MBE. Acrylic paint on wall; emulsions and acrylic on 50 Dutch wax printed cotton canvases. Overall 332 x 588cm; each panel 32 x 32 x 4.5cm.

3: *Untitled*. ©1997, Yinka Shonibare, MBE. C-print, reproduced Baroque frame, Edition 2 of 5; 112 X 91.5cm (48 X 36in).

4: *Wanderer*. ©2006, Yinka Shonibare, MBE. Wood, Plexiglass, fabric, brass 67 3/4 X 48 X 17 1/4 inches. Edition of 8.

5: *Party Time: Re-Imagen America*. ©2009, Yinka Shonibare MBE. Installation view at the Newark Museum.

6: *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. ©2008, Yinka Shonibare MBE. C-print mounted on aluminum. Image size: 185 x 127 cm.

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